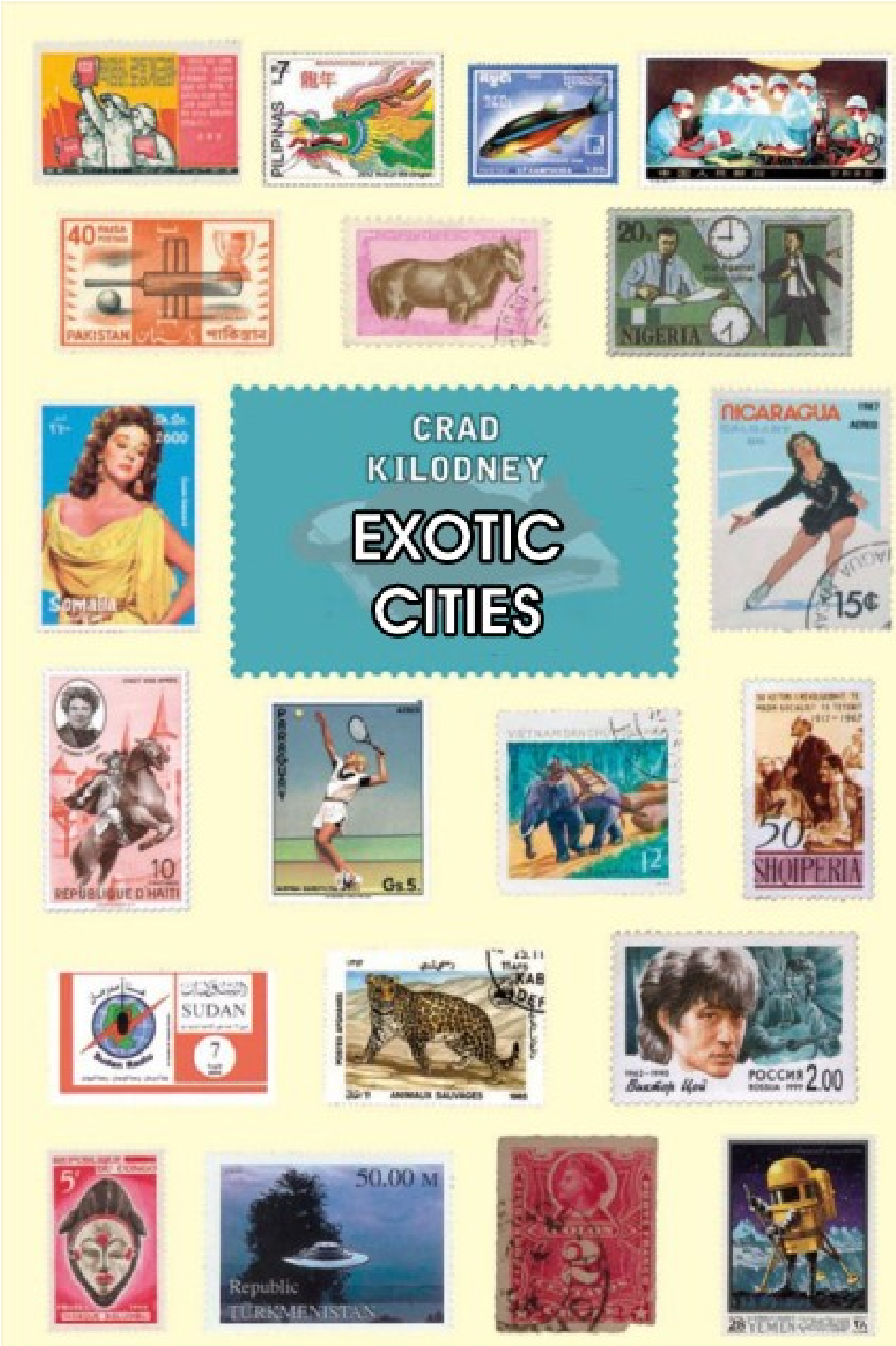
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YEMEN

Crad Kilodney

Exotic Cities

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Foreword

My favorite TV commercial is the one for American Express, where a guy comes out of the bushes staggering, filthy, exhausted, ragged, and what does he see? A luxury hotel. He walks in, looking like he's come back from hell, and the manager behind the desk gives him a rather unpleasant look. So the guy takes an American Express card out of his pocket, slams it on the counter, and bingo, it's all owed to him. I'm sure you've seen this ad. The slogan reads, "American Express: Don't Leave Without It."

Well, that's exactly what happened to me. I was visiting a certain country, which I prefer not to name, for legal reasons (I will only say that it is in the Southern Hemisphere, which is one of my two favorite hemispheres, in the world). My host quietly asked me if I would be willing to do his country a favor. It seems that a certain Canadian human rights activist asshole was making trouble for the government, which wanted to get rid of it without getting involved itself. And since I'm Canadian too, they thought I could quickly gain his trust and lure him somewhere, you see. I didn't need to kill him, just "lose" him. My host suggested a certain place where I could take this guy, arrange to misplace him, and he would never come back alive.

So I went to tell that bastard activist I knew about a place in the jungle, where opponents were being held captive by the military. I was willing to drive him there so that he could take pictures, which he could use to accuse the government. Obviously he was very interested.

So I took him to the jungle in the late afternoon, and I tried to disorient him. When he asked for a drink, I passed him a bottle of water that I had mixed with a knockout drug. He collapsed just as the sun was setting. I took his papers and emptied his pockets, then I left. I knew it would be dark when he woke up, if he ever woke up, and there was no way he could survive.

Well, what do you think happened? My flashlight broke down. Here's a lesson for all of you: never trust cheap Chinese batteries. It always says "Super Long Lasting", but that's the Chinese way of saying "Fuck you, white man!" We're gonna steal all your money, leave you in the dark, and rule the whole planet, ha ha! "We should know by now, but we keep buying this Chinese shit because it's so cheap. This is how all those slit-eyed bastards of communists (not all of them, just the majority) amassed all their fortunes.

So here I am in the dark in the middle of the jungle, and myself disoriented, unable to find my way. Fortunately, I had a small penlight on hand and, too worried to stop walking, I was very lucky, but not without difficulty, to emerge from the jungle at dawn. And what do you think I see right in front of me? You guessed it: a hotel. And just like in the pub, I walk in there, soaking wet, filthy, covered in mosquito bites, and the manager gives me a dirty look. So I pull out my American Express card and bingo, I'm the king.

I called my host, who was delighted to hear from me, after fearing for my life. The militant asshole was never seen again. The government bought me new clothes, and for the rest of my stay everything was

free - including hookers. And I will be welcome, as long as I want to go back. So from my point of view, this activist did not die in vain.

The world is very big and very round. Of course, "very tall" is relative. It is not as tall as Jupiter. But we wouldn't want to live on such a huge planet, because we would be crushed there by our own weight, and we probably couldn't travel. On the other hand, if the Earth were as small as Mercury, people would be even tighter together, and I wouldn't like that at all. I already live in the most densely populated area of Canada, among the ugliest people you've ever seen, and every time I walk down Sherbourne Street, I wish I had a big stick to bang the mouths of all those filthy monkeys that jabber in their obliviousness. (Fortunately, there are drugs for this.)

Traveling becomes a chore because of all the security measures you face at the airport. And why all this? Because of some, which I won't name, but you know who I'm talking about. These bastards pray five times a day, when they don't blow themselves up to kill us because we are "infidels". I say, let's forbid them to take the plane, period. Let them take the bus. Or they just have their own airlines, so that they can only slaughter their fellows. If we kept them off our planes, we wouldn't need any security measures.

However, everyone wants to travel. Travel opens the mind (before, I couldn't conceive of political opponents being thrown to the crocodiles, now I do). Why did the man go to the moon? Our psychology is thus made. Man needs to see new things, exciting things, strange things. You can see this in the eyes of tourists who slowly travel up Yonge Street by bus to Toronto each summer. The guide tells them, "And you see a pizzeria there ... then a shoe store ... a tattoo shop ... a McDonald's ... and a gift shop that's always empty, but that's okay, because that's right. a money laundering company… then there is a bank… another bank… a sex shop… a few drunk Indians… beggars… and that was a bookstore, but it closed for lack of customers, and now it's a Vietnamese noodle counter… ”And on both sides of the bus, the tourists, who come from Cleveland, Ohio, widen their eyes, bewildered, dumbfounded, speechless, barely able to understand. And when they get home, they'll tell their friends what they saw in Toronto. It's not an exotic city, but everyone points out that it is a "world class" city.

Generally, if you see a poster for a destination, it isn't exotic. Truly exotic destinations don't need publicity. You will only hear about it from those who have been there. This is the purpose of this book. You will not find these towns in the tourism pages of your newspaper.

The travel industry is a conspiracy to keep everyone going to the usual places. It's like mass production. It’s more profitable. Where does the travel industry want to send you? In cities like London, Paris, Rome, Athens, Havana, Hong Kong, New York, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Zurich, Frankfurt, etc. And the truth is, all these places suck. They are horrible. You go there, you spend your money, you get fooled by the locals, you herd like cattle, and you try to convince yourself that you had a good time.

There is also plan “B”, alternative destinations, supposedly less popular. But airfares are just as high, so what do you say? It pisses you off too.

Of course, if a city has no visitors at all, don't go. You can be sure that there is something really, really rotten there. My exotic cities have visitors, maybe not many, but enough to ensure their appeal as tourist destinations.

Yes, I know what you're thinking: it's only a matter of time, before these cities in turn become so popular that they won't be exotic at all. But it's not going to happen that fast. Until then, the publisher has time to make a decent profit on this book.

Speaking of which ... If you're snooping around in a bookstore, and you've read this line, you already owe me something. You left your fingerprints on this book, and maybe a few smudges as well, so you better buy it. Otherwise, do you know what's going to happen? I'll pop out of a crack in the wall, nab you in the throat, and teach you not to be a son of a bitch!

Crad Kilodney, Duke of Sherbourne

Toronto, Canada

Thursday, 2011

1. Oymyakon, Siberia

The lush city of Oymyakon, the "Garden of Siberia," welcomes the traveler like a ripe concubine parting her legs for the conquering hero returning from his epic journey to lands unknown, raping, killing, and looting. Take her, traveler, for she is all yours! Do with her as you wish! She will never complain, nor will her beauty fade!

Ivan the Terrible planted his flag on her velvety flank in 1582. She was fought over by the Cossacks and Koryaks. She was celebrated in literature by the great Maxim Gorky. And the Swedish explorer Baron Nils Nordenskjold had to be dragged away forcibly from her by his men to return home.

Today, Oymyakon is a happy and peaceful city, enjoying its status as a tourist destination for adventurous souls searching for something different.

Most sources describe Oymyakon as a very cold place, but this claim is disputed by its mayor, Vladimir Zaebanyi, a colorful fellow who dresses like an English aristocrat, drives a Ferrari, and owns a large herd of goats. "It's all Western propaganda," he insists. "All the jokes about Siberia being so cold. It's a huge exaggeration. Everything's relative, after all. Yes, someone from California would say it's cold, but to us it is brisk and refreshing, and we like it. There is a natural hot spring nearby, which contributes warmth. The summer is very pleasant. You don't need a coat. The winter is invigorating. We like to get out and enjoy it, just like you Canadians. We ski, we hike, we play hockey, we fish through the ice. And you can see the *aurora borealis* on many nights. It's breathtaking!"

The principal item on the mayor's agenda is the construction of an international airport, which he says would increase tourism ten-fold. The government is considering it. For now, travelers must fly to Yakutsk and then take a bus to Oymyakon.

The city's only hotel is the InterContinental (formerly known as the Hotel Oymyakon). Its manager is Pascal Forotti, a Frenchman who visited Oymyakon in 1990 and fell in love with it. "Many celebrities have visited here," he says. "We have a gallery of framed photos over the bar. Frankie Avalon and his wife, Kathryn Diebel, spent their honeymoon at the old Hotel Oymyakon in 1963. And Burt Reynolds and Dinah Shore stayed here in 1972. And last year, Paris Hilton was here for a week. She brought her chihuahua."

A 5-day package at the InterContinental will cost you a very modest $400 U.S. per person. Amenities include a swimming pool, exercise room, indoor squash court, conference rooms, satellite TV, and an underground walkway to the Nedotrahanaya Department Store and Promenade, with its upscale boutiques. Beautiful (albeit pricey) Russian escorts are also available 24/7 — a must for the business traveler!

The city has a reputation for excellent food. The Siber Restaurant, on Ebanutaya Plaza, is *the* place for *haute cuisine.* Chef Yuri Ebanko, who was trained at the prestigious Ukrainian Academy of

Culinary Arts, is known for his sophisticated interpretations of local ethnic delicacies, such as pan-fried reindeer testicles, deep-fried reindeer dumplings, rare Siberian truffles, and steamed salmon from the nearby Indigirka River. A typical meal at the Siber will run you about $30 U.S. per person. The more budget-minded can eat cheaply and happily at Ivan's Pizza or Irina's Bar-B-Cue, both on Avenue Volov.

For an unpredictable shopping adventure, you have to go to the quaint Doroga Losinogo Govna, a bohemian or "poor man's" district. Anyone with anything to sell simply sets up a table in the street, which is blocked off to traffic. Cartons of American cigarettes, videotapes, DVD's, electronics, Swiss chocolates, toys, clothing, hand-crafted jewlery, paintings, steaming pots of soups and teas, sausage on a bun, stuffed birds, shrunken heads, car parts, used appliances, housewares, guns, patent medicines, busts of Elvis, scuba gear, pornography, antiques, military paraphernalia, and countless other surprises compete for your attention and your money. Meanwhile, buskers, magicians, dancers, street artists, and people sticking needles in their bodies perform for audiences. Some of it is not entirely legal, but it's a summer tradition, and as long as no one makes a formal complaint, the police look the other way.

The business district is reassuringly normal, with well-dressed people carrying briefcases going in and out of modern office buildings. The city is becoming an increasingly important financial center.

Oymyakon's most notable landmark is the "Boy On The Bear" — a marble statue depicting a native boy riding atop a large white bear. According to an ancient legend, a boy was confronted by a ferocious bear while picking strawberries. He bravely offered the bear some strawberries, which the bear ate from the palm of his hand. The bear became friendly, and the boy climbed on its back and rode into the forest. People throw coins at the statue for good luck.

The Oymyakon Strawberry Festival runs every August at the Prospect Dohloi Sobaki, the local farmers' market. It's largely an excuse for people to get drunk on the local strawberry wine and dance in the streets.

A recently-built amusement park draws many visitors, although, it, too, is only open in the summer.

The nature walk is a year-round recreation, however. Oymyakoners say it keeps them fit. The natural beauties of the countryside change according to the season, but bring your camera regardless. A well-marked path takes you along the banks of the Indigirka, and through fields, forests, and hills. The strawberry fields are lovely, as are the many flowers and plants, some of which are found nowhere else in the world. The bird population is highly seasonal, ranging from multi-colored species to magnificent birds of prey. Migrating musk-oxen can sometimes be viewed at a distance. The hauntingly beautiful and mysterious bat cave is not to be missed. Oymyakoners are proud of these natural beauties and will never allow them to be spoiled by urban development.

All major currencies are accepted in Oymyakon, although exchange rates may vary. Watch out for dishonest taxi drivers who overcharge the inexperienced tourist.

Recommended vaccinations: smallpox, hepatitis (A, B, and C), Kamchatka tick fever.

2. Qonduz, Afghanistan

What do you think of when you hear "Afghanistan"? If you're like most people, you probably think of mindless death and destruction, suicide bombers, roadside bombs, terrorists, the Taliban, Muslim fanatics screaming "Death to America!", poverty, ignorance, disease, filth, backwardness, and stupid, barbaric men beating, mutilating, and murdering their women because they want to enroll in a typing course. Sure, all of that does exist — but mainly in the *south.* The *northern* part of the country is very different, which is lucky for you because that's where you're going. That's right. You're heading for the exotic city of Qonduz — the Jewel of Afghanistan, the Gateway to the North, the City That Never Sleeps!

Just make sure your travel agent doesn't send you to the wrong place. Qonduz is also spelled *Konduz,* and it is not to be confused with *Kondoz* or *Kunduz,* which are also in the north but are different places. You have to book your flight on Ariana Afghan Airlines ("We Make Every Flight An Adventure!"), because no one else flies to Qonduz. Ariana won't fly you to Kondoz or Kunduz by mistake, because those cities don't even have airports, and the pilots are not going to commit suicide by trying to land there. The suicidal ones are screened out in the job interview. Or let's hope so.

Qonduz used to be a shabby little dump stuck in the 12th Century, but thanks to the presence of American and NATO forces, it has been pushed ahead into the 20th Century — like roughly the 1970's. So they're still behind us but only by a little. Yes, you will still find a lot of hairy men in sandals working in dirty little shops, but now you will also find modern buildings, nice stores, bright lights, fast food, and normal urban entertainments — including alcohol, gambling, and prostitution.

There is only one really good hotel — the Radisson Plaza Admiral Qonduz, or "R.P.A." for short. It's an absolute magnet for NATO troops on leave, because it has all the modern amenities, and every room costs $100 U.S. a night, regardless of the number of occupants. So it's Party Central! Manager Dermot McKeown, a transplanted Londoner, is an enthusiastic booster of the new Qonduz. "This place is more exciting than London and much safer. Qonduz is jumping twenty-four hours a day, and you can go anywhere any time and not have to worry about getting robbed, shot, or blown up. Qonduzers are wonderful hosts. They love Westerners and will pick up tourists spontaneously and say, 'Hey, you American? I show you good time!'"

The fellow who decided to show me a good time was a taxi driver named Ahmad, who was on his day off but offered to drive me around for a few dollars. We stopped briefly at the Labour Exchange, where people seek any sort of work. At the men's exchange (there is a separate one for women), there were mostly poor, young boys. Ahmad asked me if I liked boys, and I said no. (It was here, by the way, that Ellen DeGeneres and her partner, Portia de Rossi, "rescued" a deformed 8-year-old boy named Yama, whom they adopted.) The women's exchange is largely for girls seeking employment as domestics, although they are mostly picked up by foreigners as daily "companions."

The Duck Pond is located in the city's park. It has ducks but no fish. Old men "fish" for the ducks using simple fishing rods and pieces of bread. If a duck is stupid enough to get hooked, it gets strangled on the spot and is then taken home and eaten.

The city has an 18-hole golf course, which Tiger Woods has described as the most challenging course he has ever played, thanks to unexploded ordnance in the ground.

Qonduz also boasts the world's second-smallest library, and a museum of amputated limbs.

The selection of restaurants includes all the familiar Western fast-food chains, which are run according to Western standards, so they have proper toilets and no rats. The local Afghani eateries must be treated as "high-risk" by Western visitors. These places have unusual smells and have never seen a health inspector.

Culinary "fusion" is provided by the popular Lentil Heaven, which offers a variety of Western foods smothered with lentils, such as lentil burgers, lentil tacos, and lentil pizza. The place is owned by Michelle Obama, wife of President Barack Obama, through her private holding company, Bamco.

Every great city has its naughty district, and Qonduz is no exception. Its naughty district is the Batouti Bazaar (or just "Bazaar") — formerly an area of humble shops and street stalls but now a glitzy circus of bars, cinemas, casinos, and strip clubs. There is a highly visible contingent of hookers — all Russian.

The most notorious attraction in the Bazaar is a raunchy club called the No-Go, which features a woman who has sex with squids. Her name is Nadira, but she, too, looks Russian. She's hot-looking and has big tits. She comes out naked, in high heels, she lies down on this mat, and an assistant places squids on her body. Nadira then writhes and moans and pretends to be having sex with these squids, which are sucking her breasts and pubes — sort of like Bela Lugosi pretending to struggle with the giant octopus in *Bride of the Monster*. The audience is supposed to believe that the squids are alive and are actually sucking her body. Rush Limbaugh was in the audience when I visited, and I went over to him and asked him why he was there. He said, "I'm trying to understand how these people think!"

Across the street from the No-Go is a strip club called Jihada-Dada, which is always packed with soldiers. Diamanti Damons was headlining there for an entire month.

Qonduz has a rodeo every October. It's called the Qonduz Stampede. Afghani cowboys lasso donkeys, ride them, and then shoot them. The kids love it.

Be sure to make time for a day trip across the border to Tajikistan to visit the Tigrovaya Balka Nature Reserve, where many endangered species of wildlife are protected. It was here that Dennis Rodman, while on an errand for Donald Trump, identified a Chongawarry fruit bat — a species thought to be extinct. For this contribution to science, Rodman was awarded the Tajikistan Conservancy Medal.

Tourists in Qonduz need U.S. dollars or euros. No one wants the Afghani currency. Your credit cards should be used only when necessary; otherwise, best keep them out of sight. There is also an

informal barter system, so bring a supply of women's panties, chewing gum, cigarettes, sunglasses, and guns.

The climate is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Spring and fall are pleasant. However, Qonduz, unfortunately, is directly in the path of migrating locust swarms, which happen occasionally in the spring and fall (but they only last for a day).

Recommended vaccinations: anthrax, dengue fever, mouse typhoid.

3. Nyala, Sudan

Ten years ago, if you had told a travel agent you wanted to go to Darfur, he would have given you a clueless look. This western region of Sudan was unknown to the traveling public. Today it's one of the hottest, trendiest tourist destinations on earth. And the Number One go-to spot in Darfur is the beautiful, vibrant city of Nyala.

A huge surge of opportunity-seekers has transformed what was once a modest, dignified little town into a colorful urban spectacle, spreading out in all directions beneath the warm, benevolent African sun. Its skeptics have been silenced, its believers vindicated. Nyala is a city on the move, generating excitement and eliciting the awe and envy of an entire continent.

As you approach Nyala's international airport, which handles sixty flights a day to and from all points of the compass, you are struck by the dramatic development radiating outward from the "Old City" — freeways, shopping centers, condos, commercial high-rises, luxury estates, rich fields of grain and vegetables, orchards, cattle and sheep ranches, and the Water World theme park. Maybe not Paradise, but darn close!

Tourism is very important to Nyala, of course, but the economy is diverse. The city boasts the largest call center in Africa, serving such clients as IBM, British Airways, Pfizer, Hudson Bay Master Card, Domino's Pizza, and Humiliation PhoneSex (West Bromwich, U.K.). Manufacturing spans the spectrum from hockey pucks to rocket engines. And Interstate Bakeries recently opened the largest bakery in Africa, from which it supplies the whole continent with Wonder Bread and Twinkies. Africa is in the Southern Hemisphere, which is one of the two most popular hemispheres in the world.

All the hotels are good by Western standards, but the best by far is the Sheraton Centre. Manager Tony Dunn, former bass player for the Flaming Monkeys (U.K.), loves to talk about the celebrities who have stayed there. "One of my chambermaids surprised Martin Clunes in bed with Miss Sudan of 2007, Deborah Nyameer Nyuon. He claimed he was helping her look for a contact lens!" According to Dunn, the beauty queen has big tits but probably does not engage in sex with dogs or severe ass whipping. He has equally interesting gossip about William Shatner, Senator (now V.P.) Joseph Biden, Barry Bonds, Fran Lebowitz, and Ivana Trump (with whom he went skiing on nearby Mt. Gahbah). Other famous guests have included Chinese pop stars Liu Yifei, Cai Yilin, Li Yuchun, Tang Jiali, and the group S.H.E., Bollywood stars Bobby Deol, Sunil Shetty, Madhuri Dixit, Arjun Rampal, Diya Mirza, and Raveena Tandon, British fashion designers John Galliano, Rhona Nampijja, Stella McCartney, and Hussein Chalayan (gay), French film stars Andy Gillet, Karine Viard, and Emmanuelle Beart, international arms dealers Jean Bernard Lasnaud, Leonid Minin, Monzer Al Kassar, and Sarkis Soghanalian, Russian mafiosi Marat Balagula, Viktor Bout, Vitali Dyomochka, Vyacheslav Ivankov, Vladimir Kumarin, and Boris Nayfeld, German politician Katina Schubert (dyke), strippers Kayla Kleevage, Candy Cantaloupes, Justa Dream, Tiffany Towers, Fantasia, and Minka, and Toronto *Star* publisher Jagoda Pike, who does not fuck dogs or suck big, black dicks. Rooms at the Sheraton Centre

run from $175 US to $500 US per night, and the maid leaves a complimentary Yorkie Bar on your pillow every morning. The beds are all equipped with orgasm climax handles, which are exactly like coffin handles.

The better restaurants in Nyala include Jahanshah Javid (Korean-Mexican fusion), Koss Umak (traditional Sudanese), Zag's (burgers), and The Manyak (homosexual art food).

The most popular nightclub in town is the Dromedary Club, where women with big breasts wearing minimal bras and panties are catapulted into a big net. The "wardrobe malfunctions" are inevitable.

The Sexy Car Wash is another attraction of this broad-minded city. Drivers pay $25 to have their cars washed by naked women covered in soap, who crawl all over the car and spread their pussies on the windshield, while the driver sits inside and masturbates. This was the inspiration for the popular Italian TV show *Sexy Car Wash.*

The Water World theme park is made possible by the large underground lake far beneath the bedrock of the city. In addition to surfing and water-skiing, the park features a long, twisting water slide well-suited to women with big breasts and skimpy bikinis. By the time the slider has reached the bottom, she is completely naked and will be reaching for one of the big penis-shaped flotation devices. Another pool allows naked women to ride on very tame lemon sharks. The rough texture of the shark's skin encourages the woman to hump herself to orgasm. There is also a ride for daredevils that simulates the experience of waterboarding, as practiced at Guantanamo.

On the outskirts of Nyala is the biggest campground in Sudan. It's always full, mostly with native Sudanese, who love the outdoors. You'll notice that they are all remarkably slim — a reflection of their self-image as fashionable and health-conscious. There's plenty of parking space for trailers and RV's, and all the comforts Westerners prefer. But don't be afraid to go on foot and camp like a Boy Scout. You can fish for trout in the streams and hike through the only forest of pine trees in Africa. One other thing: nude sunbathing is permitted!

Every November, Nyala gears up for the Sudan 1000 car race. The best drivers from around the world compete in this challenging event, which begins in Nyala and finishes in Port Sudan, a thousand miles away. This year's participants will include Mario Andretti, Mario Moraes, Danica Patrick, Scott Dixon, and last year's winner, Oriol Servia (who almost spun out when he swerved to avoid a pygmy hippopotamus, which is a protected species).

Nyala is justifiably proud of its South Darfur State University, whose football team, the "Fighting Camels," have won over forty consecutive matches in the East Africa Division 1. Team captain Ibrahim Kanteeth has a 12-inch cock that has been photographed for medical textbooks. The university also boasts the Asbat Al-Ansar Centre For Islamic Peace Studies, a graduate program in dishwasher repair, and the world's largest collection of scorpions.

The more serious, contemplative visitor will enjoy a tour of the centuries-old Sheikh Muti Monastery, where ascetics and mystics once sat in the underground vaults to commune with God and purify their souls. This experience is now yours. You will be left in complete darkness, with nothing to

eat or drink, and foul air for eight hours. On the way out, you will be given a souvenir t-shirt with the logo “Muti.” The cost for this experience is $40 US.

Want to see more of the Dark Continent in luxury? Take the Sub-Sahara Express train from Nyala to Timbuktu, Mali. The trip features gourmet meals, a bar, a casino, a lingerie fashion show, and Russian hookers who are into anal and oral sex.

Recommended vaccinations: West Nile Virus, Rift Valley Fever, polio.

4. Snuol, Cambodia

Tired of spending your hard-earned vacation money on some popular destination, only to find out that it's so *yesterday?* Wouldn't you like to be in the *avant-garde* for once, instead of bringing up the rear on a pokey donkey, as always? Well, now you can! There is a place that is not yet on tourists' radar but will be before long. That place is Snuol, Cambodia (or, as it is also called, Angk Snuol).

Conan O'Brien calls it "the most brilliant unknown vacation spot on earth." And you will, too. Happy Cambodians are eagerly awaiting your arrival. They love Westerners. Angelina Jolie found her first adopted baby in Snuol. And now Madonna says that Snuol is her next stop if things don't work out in Malawi. They're in the know!

You'll fly to Kratie and then ride south by bus on Highway 7 about fifty miles to Snuol. (Keep your camera ready for the fabulous Temple of Golonka, half-way along, on your left. It was one of the locations used in the 1970 movie *Horror of the Blood Monsters.*)

If you could float above Snuol and look in all directions, you would see an amazing array of environments: to the north, forested hills of cedar, mahogany, and baobob; to the east, endless fields of artichokes, pumpkins, strawberries, barley, and beets; to the south, a wind-swept mesa populated by penguins; and to the west, a painted desert of cacti, vultures, and gila monsters. The area around Snuol is a zoologist's dream, hosting many rare species, including the flying moose squirrel, the red elephant goldfish, Swanson's screaming bat, the pink-nosed iguana, the tiger anteater, the worm hawk, the trumpet-eared monkey, the Mimico diving giraffe, the Hungarian zipper snake, the Corinthian warthog, the barking sand toad, the gunga viper, the buzzsaw moth, the wild buffalo chicken, Hondo's chameleon mole, Corman's monster crab, and the blue-speckled burping manatee. Exotic fauna are too numerous to list, but visitors will not want to miss the Snuol Museum of Slime Mold, which was established by a generous grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

On the outskirts of Snuol, Donald Trump will be breaking ground later this year on a 50-story condominium/hotel/casino complex, which will be the tallest building in Cambodia. Until that's finished, you can avail yourself of the more-than-satisfactory amenities of the Park Inn, Snuol's only hotel. Manager Betty Liu was hired in 2006 to clean the place out after the Giant Spider Invasion and now confidently promises, "No spider you will see, or your room it will be free!" Liu is an enthusiastic booster of Cambodia: "Very honest country. Very progressive government. No corruption." Rooms at the Park Inn are only $55 U.S. per night. Cheap!

Snuol people are friendly. And most of them speak some English. But you'll make a really grand impression on them if you use these handy phrases in Khmer:

"I am happy to meet you." *("Choi ch'kai anh.")*

"It is very pleasant here." *("Choi k'det anh.")*

"I am looking for the toilet." *("Choi k'doi anh.")*

"I will see you later." *("Choi mai misa pang.")*

"Thank you." *("K'daw.")*

"You're welcome." *("K'doi.")*

"I would like this one, please." *("K'doi mai vi'en.")*

Don't be surprised to see warthogs on the streets. (I'm referring to the common Cambodian warthog, not the rare Corinthian one.) People have been feeding them for years, so they have lost their fear of people and now walk into town, expecting to be fed. But don't feed them! There is now an ordinance against it.

Snuol's great urban myth is the existence of videos of women having sex with warthogs. Some people say they were produced by the Khmer Rouge to raise money. Others say they were produced by friends of former King Sihanouk. And still others say they were produced by officials of Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (an allegation they hotly deny). Almost everyone swears these videos exist, but no one claims actually to have seen one (perhaps because there are very few VCR's in Snuol).

Well, even if you can't feed the warthogs or watch videos of warthogs fucking women, you can at least *eat* warthogs — at The Tusk, one of Snuol's restaurants. The owner is an American expat, Justin Franchi Solondz, who is a self-taught cook. The food is, shall we say, *interesting.* The "warthog with truffles" is served with a gravy containing brown clumps that we sincerely hope are the truffles, or at least some kind of mushroom.

Oddly enough, all the restaurants in Snuol are run by non-Cambodians. The Oriental Garden (pretty good mainstream Chinese) is run by Harris Dempsey Ballow. Bagelicious (Kosher, fair-quality, cheap) is run by Chaim Yehuda Reich. Seventh Heaven (good but overpriced soul food) is run by Odowa Roland Okuomosa. The Olive Tree (Italian, not the best) is run by Juris Teteris. Khmer Pizza, run by Fernando Grijalva, is reasonably good, but avoid any toppings that are still moving before they hit the oven.

Snuol's most unusual attraction is the Elvis Park — a large, complex maze of hedges with statues of American music stars scattered throughout. It's an odd collection. In addition to Elvis Presley, you will find the Everly Brothers, Black Sabbath, the Beach Boys, Ricky Nelson, Chuck Berry, Alice Cooper, Neil Sedaka (a god in Cambodia!), the Supremes, Eddie Van Halen, Bobby Darin, the Big Bopper, Bill Haley, Johnny Cash, and Frank Zappa. (Rumor has it that Adam Lambert will be next!)

I met Kem Sopranei, Cambodia's leading Elvis impersonator, who comes home to Snuol between big-city gigs. He's an e-mail pal of Miley Cyrus and Julianne Hough. He wants them to come over to Cambodia so he can fuck them. "You Westerners have a strange misconception about Asian women," he insists. "You think they know all these secret sexual techniques. They don't. They're duds compared to American women. American women are the best at every sort of sex. Cambodian women are only good for cooking." An expert speaks!

The Mayor of Snuol, Parthasarathie ("Call me Perry") Kapoor, took me on a terrifyingly high-speed motorcycle ride into the country to show me the fields of artichokes (Snuol is the artichoke capital of Asia). We also stopped to look at Angelina Jolie's estate, which is vacant most of the year but nevertheless well-maintained by admiring volunteers. Perry is a fearsome card player, by his own account, and he claims to have cleaned out Heng Samrin and Chea Sim, two high-ranking officials of the Cambodian People's Party, in an all-night poker game. They threatened to have him killed, but he's sure they didn't mean it. (Perry also confided to me that he had *made* a great deal of money investing with Bernard Madoff. And where is it now? In a bank in Panama.)

Don't go home without loading up on Cambo Cigarettes. They are excellent and very cheap. I smoke them, and so should you. Give them to your children, too. And if you're returning to New York City, you can shove a pack up Michael Bloomberg's ass.

For now, Snuol is *the* cheap and brilliant vacation — cheaper than anything advertised in the Travel section of your newspaper. But once the word gets around, it'll cost more, so don't wait!

Recommended vaccinations: Hanta virus, Zabunga virus-A, swine pseudorabies.

5. Quetta, Pakistan

You've already been to Bangkok. In fact, you've been seen too much there. They know what you are. Now you'll have to find another place to fulfill your sick needs. Fortunately, I know of such a place: Quetta, Pakistan. You can get whatever you want there. It's a Sinner's Paradise! And it's still in its early days, so prices are modest.

They love Westerners in Quetta — especially Americans. Just stroll around the bazaars and speak loudly with an American accent, and, like magic, bearded men will step out of the shadows and offer to take you for a long drive in the country, no charge. Now that's hospitality!

This pro-Western attitude can be traced back to 1990, when former CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner took a side-trip to Quetta while on vacation. Walking around town looking for fun, he went into a karaoke bar, got rather drunk, and stood up and gave a spectacular rendition of *Maybellene*, by Chuck Berry. Quetta has never been the same since.

Because of my literary reputation as the funniest living writer in the English language, I was shown around the city by the Mayor, Maqbool Ahmed Lehri, who is the author of a short book, *Approved Jokes For Muslims.* Maqbool, as he prefers to be called, explained that since 2000, Quetta has been the "sister city" of Grand Island, Nebraska, which has a large Paki community and an identical climate to Quetta's. Mayor Ken Gnadt of Grand Island, who was into multiculturalism, proposed the arrangement and made the trip to seal the deal. He and Maqbool got zonked on *qat* and ended up in the only good whorehouse at the time. "America should know about this place!" burbled Gnadt enthusiastically, and Maqbool decided then and there to develop Quetta as a place for decadent Westerners to have fun.

But what about strict Muslim standards, and sharia law, and all that repressive stuff? "That's in Islamabad and some of the hick towns," says Maqbool. "Quetta is modern. Sure, there are some radicals who scream about sin, but you get that in the West, too. Most people ignore them."

I was lodged in a penthouse at the Hampton Inn & Suites, managed by Neville Ira-Gould, a former Israeli paratrooper, whose family controls a kitchen utensil conglomerate. A keen businessman himself, he made a fortune on the Karachi Stock Exchange on a company that processes sheep manure into biofuel. The Hampton may not be the biggest or most luxurious hotel in Quetta, but like all the Hampton hotels, you get excellent value, and the beds are sized for normal people, not ugly, dwarfish Asian minorities.

Mayor Maqbool drove me around in his limo and showed me Jinnah Road and the Shahrah-e-Zarghun, which are one big entertainment district, heavy on sex but well-lit, safe, and with a good crowd of well-dressed people. This is civilization!

But first, a few drinks to get primed. Noor's Pub on Jinnah Road is a lively place. The drinks are strong, everyone smokes, and a satellite TV brings in English soccer games. Noor Muhammad is the

owner — a congenial fellow who tells coarse jokes in several languages. He loves Jews and Americans.

The slot machine in Noor's isn't reliable, so go across the street to the Gaddha Casino, which is run by a Japanese expat named Makoto Hirata. "I was an accountant for a Tokyo bank, but I got bored, so I embezzled a lot of money and came to Quetta. They don't extradite people in this country, so there's a whole community of Japanese here who had some reason to get away," he explains. The Pakis are still learning the casino games, so for now the clientele is mostly Western. Poker and slots take up most of the floor space. A Jap named Shuichi Mogi got very drunk and very lucky while we were there, but he was a friend of the owner, so it was okay.

Maqbool took me to Domenico's, a pretty good Italian restaurant on the Shahrah-e-Zarghun, owned by Domenico Raccuglia. It's a gathering place for Italian expats, the same as with the Japs, if you get my drift. (Maqbool wanted to take me to a Pashto joint where they served sheep brains, a favorite dish in Quetta, but I wasn't brave enough for that.)

Next, it was on to the hookers at the notorious Nawab Club, run by Abdul Qadir Kasi ("Casey" to his friends), who claims to have absolutely any type of woman you want. Maqbool went off with a slutty Russian babe ("My god-daughter"), and I had an encounter with a tiny Indian girl whose parents had been eaten by a tiger in the picturesque village of Ludhiana, where nose flutes are made. The standard price in Quetta is $30, and you can't even buy a carton of cigarettes in Canada for that.

We didn't go into Quetta's foremost gay club, but I'll mention it because Quetta is very gay-friendly. It's called Bottoms Up, and it's run by el-Farouk Khaki, who is also a city health inspector.

The big event of the year in Quetta is the annual Erotic Film Festival, which runs for two weeks in September. This year's guests will include Jenna Jameson, Asia Carrera, Jesse Jane, Stephanie Swift, Jessica Drake, Inari Vachs, and Shayla LaVeaux. Last year's winner in the documentary category was Ron Mann's *Chinese Squid Women,* a hard-core film about women having sex with squids (still banned in Canada). Ron Jeremy, who was one of last year's presenters, arrived late because he couldn't read his own handwriting and flew to Quito (Ecuador) instead of Quetta. One of this year's presenters will be Al Gore. Several media events will take place at the Hampton Inn & Suites, as always.

Quetta's porn shops are open all night. They're all up and down the Shahrah-e-Zarghun on both sides, just like 42nd St. in the old days (but much cleaner). There are a lot of locally-produced DVD's in Urdu and Pashto with no subtitles, and this is bizarre, extreme stuff that probably doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. I recognized a well-known TV evangelist from the U.S., and I won't tell you who. Blow-up dolls of Hillary Clinton with gigantic tits are one of the hottest items on the street.

But there are also wholesome things to do and see in Quetta. There is the Pakistan Hockey Hall of Fame, which proudly displays a signed photo of Greg Neeld, who now manages a company called Hawkeye Gold, which is the worst piece of shit on the Canadian Venture Exchange (ticker symbol: HKO).

There is a theme park called Terror Land, where you can shoot paintball guns (Commandos Vs. Taliban), drive a go-cart through a simulated mine field, and blow up a bus full of people.

The Prophet Mohammed Racetrack was closed during my visit, because of some sort of horse disease, but it should be back in operation sometime this summer.

Nature lovers will want to spend an afternoon at Hanna Lake, not far from Quetta. It has a monster like the Loch Ness monster. I didn't see it, but many people have. It was seen as recently as March of 2009 by Lindsay Lohan, who was on a photo shoot for Revlon. An elevated viewing platform also allows you to watch crocodiles feed on sacrificial goats thrown into the lake by devout Sufi mystics from the colony at Turbat.

The morning of my departure, Maqbool took me to a Jewish bagel place for breakfast and got me stoned on a poppy seed bagel. He thought it was a good joke. "Opium comes from poppies, right?" he explained. "Your poppy seeds in the West come from a different variety of poppy, so you don't get stoned. Here we use the true opium poppy for the seeds, so the bagels give you a great high." Wow, they are so way ahead of us in Pakistan!

As he dropped me off at the airport, Maqbool remembered I lived in Canada. "Do you know Ujjal Dosanjh?" he asked me. I said I didn't know him personally. "Well, if you ever meet up with that miserable low-caste prick, you tell him that if he dares to set foot in Quetta again, I will personally kick his wog ass back to India, where he belongs!" Okay, whatever.

Recommended vaccinations: Schistosomiasis, Chagas disease, sheep and goat pox.

6. Mogadishu, Somalia

Somalia was created by the union of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland, which were granted independence in 1960. Today, nearly a half century later, it is a showcase for what the modern Negro can do with his own country once freed from the shackles of European colonialism. And nowhere is this achievement more aptly demonstrated than in the capital city, Mogadishu.

Civility, refinement, peace, order, safety, courtesy, and cleanliness: these are the qualities that set Mogadishu apart from most other capital cities. The natural beauty of the sea, the sand, and the surrounding countryside combine with the calm atmosphere of its pretty, tree-lined streets and the graciousness of its people to make it just the place where you can go to decompress, recharge, and feel human again.

You can choose from numerous little hotels that are cheap and very basic in their amenities, or you can splurge and enjoy the luxuries afforded by the Park Hyatt Mogadishu, which overlooks a harbor usually full of multi-colored sailboats and yachts. Manager Paul Verciglio runs a highly efficient establishment with a cadre of bellhops resplendent in their original Versace uniforms of emerald green with gold buttons. You will find fresh flowers (corpse lily, dragon arum, Stapelia, and Huernia) in your room, as well as a little fridge with wine and cakes and a bar stocked with miniatures.

"It's a good life in Mogadishu," says Paul with a contented sigh. "Much more peaceful than the big cities in Italy, with all their violence and social unrest. In fact, it's an extraordinarily quiet city. At night you will only hear the gently pounding surf and the cuckoos calling to each other. By day, if you go downtown, you won't even hear a radio playing loud or a car horn."

Another reason for the peacefulness of the city is the curfew on juveniles under sixteen. They must be off the street by midnight, otherwise they can count on being picked up by one of the many serious-looking officers clad in stunning scarlet uniforms and white pith helmets designed by Gucci.

Despite its break from its colonial past, Mogadishu is full of Italian influence in its architecture, food, and fashions. Along the fashionable Via Jamaal Cabdi-Naasir, you will find shops of Dolce & Gabbana, Georgio Armani, and Roberto Cavalli, fine Italian restaurants, and the Globo Cinema, which runs a lot of spaghetti westerns. But two Canadians have also opened for business. Twin fashion designers Dan and Dean Caten, originally from Toronto, have opened a store called Dufarr. They are the prime movers behind Mogadishu's nascent annual fashion show, which is rapidly developing into an international event. And now it is rumored that they have struck a deal to bring Victoria's Secret to Mogadishu with a show this coming December and the simultaneous launch of a boutique.

Be sure to have a meal at Pelle's, an Italian restaurant run by Sebastiano Pelle, former head chef at the prestigious La Pergola in Rome. The best deal is the "Catch of the Day," which consists of whatever washed up on the beach that morning, served with no-name pasta and sauce.

High culture abounds in Mogadishu — live theater, a Shakespeare Festival, ballet, and the Mogadishu Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Coolio (a Negro), which recently recorded a 12-hour compilation of *Songs of the Somali Fishermen* for Sony.

Mogadishu's large metropolitan area is well-served by a fleet of electric buses, whose operators are splendidly clad in pickle green and mustard yellow uniforms designed by H.J. Heinz of Pittsburgh. But this is a city that was made for walking, so put on your comfy shoes and just walk. You'll notice that there is not a scrap of litter anywhere. These people are fanatics about clean streets, so don't litter. It means a $50 fine.

Head for the city's Central Park, which features spectacular fountains modeled after those found on the palatial estate of Benito Mussolini, and meticulously groomed plots of foxglove, water hemlock, titan arum, and Jimson weed. It's the perfect retreat for poets. Indeed, the Toronto *Star* once informed its readers that the Somalis were the poets of Africa. You'll see them sitting on the benches, scribbling away. I met Mogadishu's Poet-in-Residence, Yusef Qanees. He showed me his latest poem, titled *Epiphany:*

The steam from a cup of tea

sets frogs a-singing

in the pool of blood behind my typewriter.

The richest neighborhood is the ultra-chic Wagberi district, where a number of new stately homes have sprouted up. Robert Pattinson owns one. Others are owned by Jennifer Aniston, Annie Duke, Michael Vick, and Gene Simmons.

Mogadishu has joined the growing trend in Third World countries of pairing up with a "sister city" in the U.S. Mogadishu is now the sister city of Miami, whose Mayor, Manny Diaz, explains why: "Both cities begin with 'M.' Both cities are on the ocean. And both cities consist mostly of minorities." Making the arrangements was difficult because Mogadishu tends to be "in and out" of mayors. Fortunately, a prominent citizen, AbdiRisak Isse, took it upon himself to make the deal, since he manages the Coca Cola bottling plant, a position of even higher prestige than Mayor.

Mogadishu's future is indeed bright, thanks to its proximity to vast deposits of silicon dioxide, which one can literally scoop up by the bucketful. And foreign capital is eager to invest in this grand, exotic city, kissed by the warm waves of the Indian Ocean, where porpoises and sperm whales frolic without a care.

As I was leaving my hotel, the bellhop, upon learning I lived in Canada, asked, "Do you know Michael Ignatieff?" I said I didn't know him personally. "He looks like a big, stupid dung beetle," the bellhop continued. "I want to step on his head and crush it like the dung beetle he is. I feel so sorry for Canada." I tipped him generously.

Recommended vaccinations: encephalitis, yellow fever, Buerger's Disease.

7. Ataq, Yemen

This is a favorite joke in Yemen: A car full of terrorists has to stop at a police checkpoint. An officer leans in and asks, "Where are you going?" They reply, "We're going to attack." So the officer waves them on.

Pretty funny, eh? That's the Yemenis for you. Not just funny but kind of cracked. That's why I like them. And the biggest wackos of all are in Ataq. It's a place as old as the Bible. It was near here that Joshua slew Horam in the hills of Lachis. But Ataqers don't hold a grudge. Forgive and forget, you know? We can all get along. Hey, smoke some *qat.* It'll flip your wig! Even the pilots who fly into Ataq on the regional airline, Air Ghaban, are smoking or chewing *qat.* They swear it helps them fly better.

What makes Ataqers so weird is that they live in a B-movie bubble. The town is a popular location for low-budget movies because it's incredibly cheap to shoot in, and there is a huge area north of the town where production crews can do anything. Practically all the locals are wannabe performers of some sort, so there is no shortage of extras. As soon as you arrive at the airport, you're passing a corridor full of buskers and impersonators. There's even a snake charmer with a broken plastic flute and a rubber snake, who pauses frequently to tell jokes from old American TV shows.

My host was Fadi ("Don't call me Fatty") Ayoub, who owns the Hollywood Joke Store. He claimed to be my biggest fan in Yemen. He swears there are readers in Yemen who remember me from my advice columns in *Rustler,* which are major collector's items and almost impossible to find outside of Canada. It's remarkable that any copies ever found their way to Yemen!

Fadi drove me around the town, which didn't take long, because it's a small place. He showed me the area where movies are made, and then we drove by the big amusement park on the south side of town. It's modeled after what Yemenis have seen of amusement parks in the movies.

"We've got film people coming here from all over the world," Fadi explained in perfect English. "Europe, Russia, Australia, Asia, and even Israel. So far, the biggest movie ever made here was a production by Golan and Globus called *Die, Caveman, Die!,* starring Hulk Hogan. It was never released in North America, at his own request. But now we've got something really big coming, and keep this under your hat for now, because Spielberg hasn't made it official yet. The sequel to *E.T.* is going to be filmed here!" (Okay, so don't tell anyone. It's a secret. *The* E.T. *sequel is going to be filmed in Ataq, Yemen!)*

Fadi was eager to introduce me to another Crad Kilodney fan, Armin Schroecker, Manager of the Ataq Hilton, which is the only hotel in Ataq and one of the few buildings with flush toilets. (Yemenis regard flush toilets as strange. They wonder, "When you flush, where does it go? Does it just disappear?" Which is exactly what I wonder about the taxes I pay to Ottawa.) My room at the Ataq Hilton was comfortable, but it had an oddly institutional style. Armin explained why: "Everything is

bolted down. Everything is unbreakable. With film people, you expect the worst. The ones we get here are crazy." Guests in Ataq have to buy a TV at check-in if they want one. If they don't destroy it, they get their money back.

Fadi took me to the Hollywood Diner for lunch. (Ataq is full of places called "Hollywood" something.) It, too, was modeled after what Yemenis have seen of American diners in the movies, and the only food served is hamburgers, french fries, apple pie, and coffee. Yemenis go there, but there's no Yemeni food, because they don't want to look low-class in front of visitors.

Speaking of visitors, there were two movies being shot in Ataq while I was there — a Latvian movie about zombies who terrorize a secretary on vacation in the Mojave Desert, and a Taiwanese movie about schoolgirls being kidnapped by aliens for breeding purposes (which has to be a comedy, because everyone knows aliens only abduct white people).

Fadi's joke store stocks mostly masks and costumes, as well as toys and novelties related to movies. He is extremely fond of American sci-fi and monster movies from the 50's, as are most Ataqers. They regard such movies as the pinnacle of culture. Their favorite movie is *It Conquered The World.* Their second-favorite is *Them.* Their favorite actress is Beverly Garland (good choice!). She's a goddess in Yemen. Their favorite actor is — get ready for a surprise — Whit Bissell. As for comic personalities, their two favorites are Zacherley and Soupy Sales (incredible!).

I had to buy something from Fadi's store just to be gracious, so I bought a box of toilet targets with a picture of Velupillai Prabhakaran. He gave me a good deal — $6 for a box of 200. "I thought they were targets for shooting," he said. "But my customers said they were too small. I only realized too late that they were for pissing on."

The one thing in Fadi's store that isn't fake is guns. Nobody sells fake guns in Yemen. The very idea is absurd to them. Why buy a fake gun when real ones are cheap and available everywhere? Every store in Ataq sells guns on the side. I saw guns in a bakery, a shoe shop, and even a laundry. In fact, when Fadi introduced me to the laundry owner and said I was from Canada, the man offered to *give* me a gun so I could shoot Indians. "You kill Indians! Make Canada better country!" he said. I had to decline politely. Fadi explained to me afterwards, "Yemenis think Indians are very bad, and they don't understand why Canadians tolerate them. They're all drunks, they're good for nothing, and no matter how much money you throw at them or how much you kiss their asses, it doesn't make any difference. They just go on being a big drain on Canada." I said some Canadians would agree.

The amusement park that I mentioned earlier is strictly for thrill-seekers. The mechanical safety of the rides is, shall we say, hit or miss. They give you a helmet and a kind of protective vest, and you ride at your own risk. The Fun House is pretty cool, though. Instead of mechanical monsters popping out of the walls, real men with knives jump out at you. They're all wannabe actors, so it's okay. No one has ever been killed, although there have been a few minor injuries.

There is really not much else noteworthy in Ataq. Don't try to talk to the women. They're not allowed to talk to strangers. They can't even work as extras in movies. And, of course, they're all wrapped up like mummies because of sharia law. And they actually prefer it that way. As for other

culture, there isn't any — just what relates to movies. Come to think of it, if it weren't for the movie industry and American influence, Ataq would be just another miserable Muslim shithole.

When I returned to Toronto, an immigration officer at the airport asked me where I'd been. I told him, "I went to Ataq, Yemen" — after which I spent two hours being interrogated by the RCMP. Fucking dumbass Canadians!

Recommended vaccinations: bubonic plague, Leishmaniasis, idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura.

8. Pyongyang, North Korea

North Korea recently fired another missile, and many people are concerned (although not in my neighborhood of brain-dead foreigners and white trash). But what's it all about, anyway? Are the North Koreans a proud, independent people determined to resist the aggression of American warmongers, or are they just a bunch of insane, retarded, slitty-eyed Commie bastards? Or are they something entirely other?

For an authoritative answer, I asked a homosexual political science professor at the University of Toronto (who shall remain nameless, but he has a beard and wears an earring, and his lover's name is Paul) to explain the North Koreans to me. "The North Koreans are no different from you or me," he said. "What do all human beings want? They want to be understood and accepted for what they are, without prejudice. Is that so wrong? Of course not. It's the Americans who are clearly the aggressors. They always have been throughout their history. I teach a course on the subject." Okay, I guess that helps.

But let's go check things out for ourselves!

Pyongyang, North Korea! Who has not wanted to travel there? (Put your hands down. That was a rhetorical question.) Yes, Pyongyang! The city that lies in the fabled Valley of Monkeys, whose people Buddha described as "happy, fat, and drunk on wine." Let's throw back the curtain of history and look through the dense fog of time.

The North Koreans, unlike their southern cousins who call themselves "Koreans" (although the term is anthropologically meaningless, since it merely refers to a peninsula), are descended from the Mogollon people, who settled and controlled the region as far back as 500 BC. Their early settlements may still be glimpsed protruding from the fields of corn that spread westward from the Taedong River. They feared only bears and fire. The Mogollon evolved from hunters and gatherers who shot wild boars with bows and arrows, then became pearl divers and fishermen, and then finally became farmers and breeders of turkeys, until they disappeared mysteriously and quite suddenly in 1211 AD, after a great fall of toads from the sky. Charles Fort described this fall of toads in one of his books. Shakespeare referred to it cryptically in *Macbeth.* And it was discussed at length in *Memoirs of a Lunatic: The Diaries of Lord Archambault of Dorking,* by Sir Oliver Sturm-Ruger (Oxford Univ. Press, 1956).

What happened to the Mogollon people? If the toads could talk, what would they tell us? We could go ask them, for the Toad Habitat, one of Pyongyang's most popular tourist attractions, is located about 20 miles north of the city. It's the reason why Pyongyang is unofficially the Toad Capital of Asia. The toad figure is seen everywhere as a sort of mascot of Pyongyang — a sly, mischievous creature that obviously knows more than it's willing to tell. You could try to plumb its secrets, but it will not reveal them, even if you stroke it lovingly, or even if you choke it and suck on its head. And if you do that,

you will be put somewhere where there is nothing sharp, and stern orderlies watch you day and night. And that wasn't the purpose of this trip, was it?

Who really understands these Toad People, these offshoots of the Mogollon, better than a Westerner who has lived in Pyongyang for many years? That would be Suzanne Gittens, Manager of the Comfort Inn, located on the West Bank of the Taedong. It is Pyongyang's best hotel. From the upper floors, you get a panoramic view of the city — The Monument of the Revolution, the Monument of the Heroic People's Struggle Against Aggression, the Monument of the Worker, the Soldier, and the Intellectual, the Monument of Peace, the Arch of Triumph, the Arch of the Glorious Future, the Arch of the Iron Will, the Statue of the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, the Statue of the Great Father Kim Il-sung, the Juche Tower, the Tower of Truth Television, the Communist Victory Stadium, the Revolutionary University of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, the People's Communist Water Purification Plant, the Socialist Democratic People's Garbage Incinerator, the Eternal Zoo of the Communist Party of North Korea, the Glorious and Prosperous People's Farmer's Market, the Democratic People's Revolutionary Electrical Plant, the Golden Arches Communist Noodle Works, and the Unconquerable Socialist Revolutionary People's Cineplex Theatre, featuring two screens. (The Revolutionary Children's Monument of Resistance and the Revolutionary Communist Day Care Centre are not visible from the hotel.)

Suzanne Gittens enjoys special respect as the Westerner who brought peanut butter to North Korea. Peanut butter is now widely eaten, and the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il has personally endorsed it as a healthy food for long life, even though it was invented in America.

"The North Koreans think of themselves as being in a state of war all the time, even when they are not actually at war," explained Gittens. "And they cannot be defeated, because their will is stronger than the enemy's. But they do have one fear — centrifugal force. Centrifugal force is an American weapon whose purpose is to hold back the progress of the people and their revolution. It is invisible, yet it has a physical effect on people and objects. North Korean soldiers march in a stiff manner to reduce the effect of centrifugal force. The missiles that are being fired are intended to disrupt the waves of centrifugal force sent down by American satellites. The Juche Tower, which is the most important structure in Pyongyang, contains an energy beam to protect the city from centrifugal force, and it is supposed to be effective. 'Juche,' of course, is the state ideology of North Korea. It means 'independence' or 'self-reliance.' It is also the name of the country's most popular brand of cigarettes, most popular brand of toothpaste, and most popular brand of condom."

Because of my reputation as the funniest living writer in the English language (way funnier than Dave Barry, a wanker who refuses to answer e-mail), I was given the same room at the Comfort Inn that Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag stayed in. Their visit to Pyongyang last December is the best-kept secret in Hollywood. Even the gossip columns failed to pick it up. The newlyweds went to Pyongyang to escape the prying eyes of the media, and only Gittens knew who they were, since American celebrities are never seen on North Korean television.

There is not much television in North Korea anyway. There are three channels with limited hours. Korean Central Television (KCTV) is the official broadcaster of news. It is best known for the hypnotic spiral that appears on the screen as propaganda messages are spoken. Korean Educational and Cultural TV has lots of shows featuring children laying flowers at the foot of monuments and uniformed children marching with little flags. Mansudae TV has movies with revolutionary themes (especially the Korean War), sports (gymnasts performing in arenas with no audience in the background), current affairs (missile launches), science (lab techs studying grains of wheat under a microscope), and a popular game show called *Name That Enemy,* in which contestants must identify American warmongers to win a carton of noodles.

North Korea's aversion to foreigners is somewhat exaggerated. Basically, you have to prove you're not a spy. But it's like every other country's Customs and Immigration: some officers are nice, and some are mean. If you are neatly dressed, clean shaven, soft-spoken, and polite, you will probably get in. If you look like white trash, with baggy pants and baseball cap turned backwards, you will be taken into a room and beaten to death, and your family will be told you died in a boating accident. (This is the sort of reform we need in Canada.) There is also a "Kill On Sight" list with specific names. Currently, Nick Nolte is at the top of the list.

The visitor to Pyongyang must be accompanied by an escort. This is actually a good thing, because if you don't know the language or your way around, you could get yourself into some kind of trouble. Besides, the escorts need the employment. My escort was a plain girl named Kim, who desperately needed a makeover and implants, both of which would be considered counter-revolutionary in North Korea. She took me on a long walking tour of the city. (We didn't get on any streetcars, because they have been known to electrocute their passengers.) We ended up in one of the nice parks for which Pyongyang is known. I asked her why she was so flat-chested, and she acted hurt. She said she was a very average and *normal* North Korean girl. I told her I had a special skin cream from Canada that would make her breasts grow, and if she came to my hotel room in the evening, I would apply it to her myself to show her the right way to do it. She was very eager to accept my kindness, but at the appointed hour she never showed up. The next day, she would only say vaguely that she had not been able to come.

We took a short ride on the subway, which is the deepest in the world, since it is intended to serve as a shelter in the event of a nuclear war. Now, the subway is basically for show. The stations are clean and full of patriotic art. But for a city of over 3 million people, the crowd is mysteriously thin. People are supposed to be going to work, but a lot of them are faking it. Officially, there is no unemployment in the Communist paradise of North Korea, so everyone must behave *as if* they were going to work. But when they get to their destinations, a lot of these riders are looking at factories that are shut down, office buildings with no electricity, and shops with almost nothing to sell. So they will sit and do nothing at the workplace or go for a walk, and then return home. The subway is absurdly cheap by anyone's standards, so it is a major money-loser, but the regime needs it for propaganda purposes.

In Pyongyang, if you are unemployable for whatever reason, you can be a street vendor and sell cold, wet noodles in a paper cup, or you can be given a job title such as "emotion recognition specialist" or

"anti-centrifugal specialist" and sit at a desk in an unheated warehouse, waiting for the phone to ring, which it won't because it isn't even connected. Directing traffic is another make-work program, and you will see lots of girls in blue uniforms standing in intersections, waiting for some traffic to show up.

Pyongyang has restaurants with such names as Communist Restaurant, Glorious Restaurant, Victory Restaurant, or Happy Smiling Toad Restaurant. They serve mostly noodles and vegetables and very little meat. I dropped in at the Communist Restaurant, which is run by Tadamasa Goto. "Only foreigners can own restaurants here," he explained. "The North Koreans are not allowed to." I said that had a certain symmetrical logic, since in Canada only Koreans can own convenience stores and white Canadians can't. Goto readily admits he is not a trained chef, and his restaurant used to be very bad. But then something good happened. "Gordon Ramsay was in town. He has a Korean grandparent, by the way, which most people don't know about. Anyway, he had heard about this place, and when he saw how bad it was, he decided to feature it on *Kitchen Nightmares.* The episode will appear on TV over there in September or October. There were rats, dead cats, stinking pools of grease, mold, you name it. The chef I had working for me was the son of a Party member and I couldn't fire him, but Ramsay picked him up and literally threw him out. He's an ex-footballer, you know, and these Koreans are small enough to pick up and throw. After that, he cleaned the place up and updated the menu, and the government sent me a proper chef out of embarrassment." I tried the soy turkey sandwich with gravy, noodles, and peas, and it was not bad — a lot better than the atrocious meat loaf I once had in the Hudson Bay cafeteria at Yonge and Bloor, where the cooks are Korean and put garlic in everything, including the cole slaw. Goto doesn't actually make a living from the restaurant. He has business contacts in Japan, and he moves shipments of guns, drugs, and counterfeit goods for the North Korean government.

On one of my walks with Kim, my escort, I commented on the police on every street corner. Kim explained they needed the work. Naturally, there's no street crime whatever in Pyongyang — exactly the opposite of Toronto, where you have plenty of crime on the streets, and the police are nowhere in sight. (You have to call them, get it?) Toronto's Chief of Police, Bill Blair, is a wimp who lets Tamil protesters block streets and highways, because he believes in cultural sensitivity, and he marches in the Gay Pride parade, too. He looks like a big, stupid rabbit.

I treated Kim to an ice cream, and we sat on a park bench. I kept trying to put my hand up her skirt, and she kept resisting, although I could tell she was getting hot. "It is counter-revolutionary," she said. And then I got some insight into North Koreans and sex. The government strictly suppresses visible sex. There is no sexual imagery anywhere. More than that, the government has a long-term plan to eliminate sex altogether and have people reproduce by binary fission. You may remember such news items as the two-headed snake, or the two-headed dog, or the two-headed sheep. These were the results of early North Korean experiments to make higher animals reproduce by binary fission. The animals lived, but the experiments were regarded as failures. Nevertheless, the government considers binary fission to be the ultimate fulfillment of *juche,* so they will keep at it. Kim believed there was some sort of chemical being put in the drinking water to prepare the people for binary fission, so she was only

drinking bottled water because she did not want to divide unexpectedly. She also said there were rumors of experiments gone wrong, resulting in abortions.

It was all gruesome stuff, so to get her mind off it, I suggested we go for a gondola ride on the Taedong River. The gondolas look exactly like the ones you see in movies about Venice. Couples can enjoy a long ride while being serenaded by the gondoliers, who sing sentimental songs of revolutionary victory. Meanwhile, you can watch pearl divers reviving an ancient custom of their ancestors. Resplendent in their orange wet suits, they dig barnacles from the river bottom to harvest a variety of brown, sticky pearl found nowhere else in the world. It's not in the same class as the fine pearls from Australia but certainly good enough for Canadians who shop in bargain stores. These divers swim in synchronized fashion, performing an artistic water ballet, while blending in with schools of river porpoises that are extremely happy in the extremely clean waters of the Taedong, thanks to the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. I guided Kim's hand to my crotch so she could feel how keen I was for her. She looked away and pretended not to be aware. I pressed her hand down more firmly and said, "What is this called in Korean?" She replied, *"Chaji."* I worked my hand under her skirt and inside her panties to her privates. "What do you call this?" I asked. She replied, *"Poji."* I moved my hand around the back and into the crack of her ass. "And the other one?" I asked. *"Ttong-koo-mung,"* she replied, breathing hard. She started stroking me gently….

Which reminds me to talk about the ballistic missiles. The North Koreans have been launching them from a site in the northeast called Musudan-ri (CIA code name: "Boardwalk"). But it's getting obsolete already, so they're building a new one at a site about 75 miles northwest of Pyongyang, called Pongdong-ni (CIA code name: "Park Place"). The missile workers are looking forward to the move because the new site has a nicer lawn, is closer to shopping, and is in a better school district. The government will run daily bus tours from Pyongyang to show off the new site, and Suzanne Gittens thinks the tours will be a big money-maker, since visitors have heard so much about the missiles. The new site will have a gift shop, too.

The vineyards are on the same road as the new missile site. It will surprise you to learn that the North Koreans have been making wine for almost fifty years — reviving an ancient Mogollon tradition — although it has taken a while to develop the quality to make it a viable export product. The *People's Victory* wine actually won an honorable mention in an Asian wine competition held in Hanoi, and the *Glorious Leader* wine was nominated in the "Best New Wine" category on Vancouver's skid row. And a bottle of *Communist Defeat of American Aggression* wine can be glimpsed briefly on an episode of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians.*

Pyongyang now has a "sister city" in Canada. Because of my influence as a shameless promoter of uranium mining in Saskatchewan (e-mail me for current stock recommendations!), I was able to arrange the "sistering" of Pyongyang and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (CIA code name: "Mosquitoville"). Mayor Jim Scarrow is very excited about the new arrangement. "It's a very good thing for us," he says, sweat dripping off his brow. "After all, they're developing nuclear weapons, and we don't want to be attacked. If we show them we like them, we'll be helping to keep peace in the world. I mean, look, we have plenty in common. Both cities begin with 'P.' Both cities are on a river.

They're Communist, and we're somewhat socialist, okay? They just want to do the right thing for their people, and so do we, right? There's common ground. We can all get along. We love all the minorities — aboriginals, black people, Asians, whatever. We have Korean people here. We value them as citizens. My wife buys milk and bread from them. The people from Pyongyang are welcome to visit any time. We'll show them a good time. We're willing to trade with them, to help them. We'll do whatever it takes so they don't attack us…." He goes on like this for a half hour, but you get the gist.

I can't forget the show trial! The talk of the town during my visit to Pyongyang was the trial of two Americans, which was being broadcast daily on KCTV. Roger Angell and Ben Greenman were charged with "hostile acts," including spying and "spreading centrifugal force." I have no idea what they actually did, but Suzanne Gittens said it didn't matter. "It follows a familiar script," she explained to me. "They get a couple of Westerners on a fake charge and threaten them with the death penalty. Inevitably, the foreign government or company offers a discreet bribe for the release of the offenders, the Party scores propaganda points, and Kim Jong-il's family pockets the bribe." And what if no one is willing to pay? "Then, of course, they'd be executed. But so far that's never happened." As of the time of my departure, however, no offer had been made to save these guys, so whoever they are, they must be major bastards.

When I checked out of the Comfort Inn, I was allowed to keep the souvenir flashlight that is placed in every room in case the electricity goes off. It's in the shape of Kim Jong-il. When I remarked to Suzanne Gittens that it looked a lot like a dildo, she said that she always suspected that some designer made it like that on purpose as a way of poking fun at the government, and the Party still hadn't caught on. I decided it would be a cute parting gift for Kim.

And so we went for one last excursion into the countryside, to skip happily across meadows and bogs and through forests, looking for trolls and fairies and elves, and to fall back in time to be with the Mogollon people, dressed in their sunbonnets of black and purple, chasing the wild boars, babbling of the ancient ways that must never die but live forever, of battles fought and virgins raped, of loves and toads, of days when seafarers navigated by the Milky Way. We embraced and kissed beneath the ivy bowers, as majestic turkeys screeched above the romantic fields of corn. Our groins tumescent and throbbing, we sang of the Dear Leader standing gloriously on the Mountain of Monkeys, vanquishing centrifugal force with a mighty sweep of *juche.* I did pull the moist panties from my little flat-chested Kim and dragged her into the shrubbery, which was soft and cool and smelled of shrubbery, and she seized my monument and impaled herself on it, while I worked the flashlight figure of Kim Jong-il into her *ttong-koo-mung* and bit her yearning nipples. We thrashed about like rabid wombats, and I lost my mind beneath the gathering purple clouds of dusk. Then the rains came, and we were both at peace….

The rumors of Anne Murray's abortion in Pyongyang are unfounded. The fetus had two heads, but neither one resembled her.

The North Koreans will accept $500,000 for the release of Roger Angell and Ben Greenman, or $300,000 for just one of them, and that's absolutely as low as they're willing to go, so forget about

trying to cut a better deal. The deadline is midnight, July 1st, Pyongyang time. If no offer is received by then, the spies will be executed by firing squad.

Recommended vaccinations: Mucha Habermann Disease, mycosis fungoides, ichthyosis vulgaris.

9. Guiyu, China

Astute commentators have declared the 21st Century to be the Century of China. And no stronger argument supports this view than the example of Guiyu, which is located in Shantou, Guangdong. Guiyu is the 21st Century Techno-Paradise, Eco-Paradise, and Green Revolution City all rolled into one.

In the span of one generation, this exotic city has been transformed from a sleepy agricultural village to the world's foremost recycling center for electronics. And its inhabitants have been transformed from simple farmers to technological workers who enjoy great prosperity. The average resident lives in a house or modern apartment, drives an eco-friendly car, and enjoys all the latest electronic gadgetry. And how about 100-plus channels of cable and satellite TV!

Every day, long lines of trucks disgorge discarded computers, phones, TV's, VCR's, and related items at a large depot. From there, the sorted items are sent out to over a hundred companies for disassembly and recycling. Large amounts of precious metals, industrial metals, and rare earths are extracted from all the debris. Other components are chopped up and reprocessed as raw materials for construction and agriculture. Nothing is wasted. The wealth generated from all this activity is enormous.

Hotel Manager Jonathan Litvak of the Westin Guiyu is a latecomer to this revolution but has still seen remarkable changes since he arrived here eight years ago. "Everything is green and clean. The air and water are perfect. The urban environment is like something out of a futuristic movie. We have modern buildings, underground malls, sports facilities, an efficient light-rail transit system, lovely parks, hotels, restaurants, you name it. And it's all neat as a pin. In fact, you can't even spit on the sidewalk."

The Westin Guiyu is noteworthy for its glass exterior, which is tinted with real gold. Under the right conditions, airplanes approaching the international airport can see the sun's brilliant reflection from ten miles away. The lobby is a huge atrium adorned with sculpted coral from the offshore reefs and a mosaic of dazzling semi-precious gemstones, and a 60-foot waterfall cascades into a pool filled with pink and purple angelfish from the island of Bali. Despite all this opulence, the hotel is surprisingly affordable, with most rooms in the range of $129 to $149 a night.

All visitors tour the industrial parks in air-conditioned buses. The parks themselves are works of art, with each plant having its own landscaping treatment and garden.

Downtown Guiyu is a spotlessly clean district of upscale boutiques and shops. High-tech gadgetry is everywhere, of course. The Communist government has decided not to meddle with all this success, so the city is unusually free to do its own thing. You can even buy *The Wall Street Journal* and *Playboy.*

All vehicles, including buses, are electric or hybrid. The little police cars are especially cute. They operate on a biofuel made from chicken manure. And the chickens are fed reprocessed plastic turned into nutrients by a secret process invented by Sha Bi Biofuels.

Guiyu gets most of its electricity from a highly unusual power plant that makes use of electric eels — a technology invented by Hung Wa Holding Company. Thousands of eels are kept in pools, and their discharges are collected and stored in batteries. The power is then inverted from DC to AC and fed into the local grid. An identical plant will be built in Laramie, Wyoming, by Hung Wa's international subsidiary, Dynamic Electro-Fish, of Mississauga, Ontario (see Laramie *Boomerang* archives for April 1, 2009).

There are all kinds of restaurants in Guiyu, but the trendiest is Ba Po, which specializes in — what else? — Chinese cuisine. Head Chef Chee Loong Cheong, formerly of the prestigious Haozhan in London, England, serves up his exotic creations — chop suey, sweet and sour pork, and fried rice.

But competition has arrived in the form of a Mexican restaurant called El Chapo's. Mexican chef and entrepreneur Joaquin Guzman arrived in Guiyu last year with a trunkful of money, saw the opportunity, and seized it. Now everyone's going crazy over his tacos and burritos. Pop star Lady Gaga went gaga over the food! She claims she put on five pounds eating daily at El Chapo's during her recent one-week tour. She performed to packed houses at the Gun Kai Club, whose owner, Chang Chi Kao, considers himself the Lady's number one Chinese fan.

And last winter, Mel Gibson was on hand to celebrate the opening of the Friendly Chicken, hilariously designed by artist Chester Brown of Toronto. Patrons enter the restaurant through the chicken's head, eat in the stomach, and exit by the anus. Gibson remarked to the media, "Australians love this sort of humor." But Jonathan Litvak of the Westin Guiyu insists it represents an ecological theme.

Guiyu's mascot is the bird of paradise, and if you want to see them, go to the park along the bank of the Lianjiang River, where they roam freely.

The Lianjiang is a pristine river. And when it freezes over in the winter, residents go ice skating.

Golden fields of millet and corn surround the tributaries of the Lianjiang, and you can climb at least part-way up the slope of Tharpu Chuli, a dormant volcano, which enriched the soil in the distant past. A high fence marks off the Gungbung Conservation Area, where the rare white tiger is protected.

The biggest surprise in Guiyu is an authentic Shaker Village, founded by dissidents who left the South Union, Kentucky, community in 1922 and traveled to China in search of spiritual purity and a population of converts. Now well-established, it numbers nearly a thousand members, who earn a good living fashioning bar stools and roulette wheels out of maple, oak, and applewood, all crafted with the elegant functionality for which the Shakers are well known. But these people are not stuck in the past. Oh, no! The Shakers have always embraced technology and invention. The community's leader, Sister Mary Catherine Park Hui Gee Crucified of Jesus, sees a Divine Hand at work in Guiyu and calls the city "a new Garden of Eden."

Guiyu now has a sister city in the U.S. — Compton, California. Mayor Eric J. Perrodin says, “We be gettin’ down wid dem Chinamen!” He regards Guiyu as a model to emulate and intends to remake Compton into a major recycling center for electronics, generating thousands of high-paying jobs. He has not yet traveled to Guiyu himself but intends to go with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger this fall. The Governor sees electronics recycling as the perfect industry to cure California’s financial mess.

Recommended vaccinations: yaws, Mucolipidosis IV, jejunal atresia.

10. Filadelfia, Paraguay

I was having lunch with Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi at Opera Plaza Sushi in San Francisco about six months ago, and she said to me, "Every so often, I need to get away from it all. I want to go where nobody knows me, where I can relax and have a change of scenery. So I go to Filadelfia, Paraguay. It's a wonderful place! You should go." So I did.

Filadelfia is still very much off the beaten track. Almost all Paraguay tourism is concentrated in the capital, Asuncion, and I certainly won't knock it. It's a great place to buy luxury goods cheap (because they are smuggled in), and the hookers are hot. But Asuncion is not the *exotic* Paraguay. To see that, you have to go to Filadelfia.

There's only one bus a day between Asuncion and Filadelfia. It's an all-day trip, departing in the morning and arriving in the evening, so pack your lunch. And keep your eyes peeled for celebs in disguise, because more of them are following Nancy Pelosi's example.

As you head north from the capital, you'll see the scenery change from farmland and grassland to the deciduous scrub forest of the vast Chaco Boreal, which makes up the entire western half of Paraguay. This is a land where cowboys rope steers and shoot rattlesnakes (or vice-versa), where weird desert cacti burst open with hundreds of deadly tarantulas, where people speak the strange Guarani language (which only they can understand), and toothless hags cut the throats of chickens to cast spells on their enemies. Unknown creatures leave mysterious tracks in the sand, homosexuals are hanged from gibbets, rowdy men indulge in eye-gouging for sport, and packs of wild dogs howl under the full moon. So, it's kind of different.

When you arrive at the bus depot, you'll be aware immediately of the German influence that governs the whole town of Filadelfia. The depot is designed in the Sonntags Geschlossen style of architecture, which was so favored by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and which finds its finest recapitulation in the Greyhound Bus station in Sudbury, Ontario. In front of the Filadelfia bus depot, which is (not surprisingly) located on the Avenue Hindenburg, you will see the only statue of Fred Astaire in the world. Astaire was actually German (born Fred Austerlitz), and his father was born in Linz, Austria, not far from Hitler's birthplace in Braunau am Inn. The two families were acquainted, in fact.

An old bus marked "Westin Filadelfia" is ready and waiting to take new visitors to the only hotel in town. Hotel Manager Michael Czarcinski (not related to Kazimierz Czarcinski, who opened the first ear wax clinic in Poland, in the city of Cracow, in 1959) personally greets every new guest. The hotel is never full enough to make him happy, and he is the town's number one tourism booster. "We're not actually affiliated with the Westin hotel chain," he admits. "I just stole their name for the hell of it. I mean, what can they do to me?" He hints slyly with a wink that he has good enough connections in the capital that no one would ever be able to give him any trouble.

The Westin Filadelfia is not a bad place. Quite cheap — only $35 a night. There's no TV or air-conditioning, but there are flush toilets, and the maid service is diligent. (For a few dollars, the maid will tuck you in at night, if you get my meaning.) The furniture is of high quality. It's made locally by the large German Mennonite community that dominates life in Filadelfia.

The Mennonites started arriving in the 1920's and built themselves a fine settlement, which is on the outskirts of town. They live communally, and their economy is based on farming and handicrafts. Another influx of German immigrants followed in the 40's, and a lot of them are still alive in their eighties and nineties. So, Filadelfia is very much a German town in every respect. The only other significant population is the local indians, the Guarani, who mostly work as servants or as street vendors living modestly off the tourist trade.

Werner's Tavern is open late for new arrivals wanting a good dinner, and it's all good German food, washed down with the local beer, Fila, which is brewed by the Mennonites. Werner's is really the only place to hang out in Filadelfia. Werner Missgeburt, the owner, is a big, jovial fellow who tends the bar and likes to laugh and tell coarse jokes. He likes to say that he never has to throw anyone out of his establishment, because it's easier to let them stay and die of old age.

Werner's is cheerfully decorated with Nazi war memorabilia, including a half-size replica of a Stuka dive bomber. This is where the old Germans gather every night to sing those good old patriotic songs of the Third Reich — although they all insist they were never members of the Nazi party or involved in any atrocities.

Former President General Alberto Stroessner used to come up to Filadelfia occasionally and drink beer with the Germans. They all remember him as a good friend, and there are plenty of framed pictures on the walls of the tavern to prove it. "All the Guarani girls flirted with him," says Werner. "And he had his pick of them."

The Guarani women are actually quite lovely for indians. They have big breasts and make money posing bare-breasted with tourists for photos. It's actually a pretense. They don't normally go bare-breasted, but the tourists assume they do and routinely pay $5 to be photographed next to a half-naked woman with big knockers. (This is the sort of free-enterprising initiative Canadian indians could learn from, except that they're all so seedy-looking no one would want to photograph them — with or without their clothes.)

The Guarani also have a fake festival for tourists called the Beer Festival, which takes place several times a year. The highlight is the beer bottle dance, in which a woman balances a stack of ten beer bottles on top of her head — *one on top of the other!* Of course, they're attached to each other, but it's still an amazing balancing act. Indian musicians also play bogus indian music, and vendors sell beans and rice, as well as a stew made with capybara, which is a giant rat. (I didn't get to try it, but the Krauts said it was pretty good if you have plenty of beer to wash it down with.)

As I mentioned earlier, celebrities have occasionally been seen in Filadelfia. They pretend to be ordinary tourists and usually go unrecognized since there's no TV. Jack Black, Teri Hatcher, Cindy

Crawford, Bono, Peter Tork, and Pete Wentz have all been spotted in the past year, according to Michael Czarcinski. But they all register under false names, so there's no proof on paper.

So what would attract such people to Filadelfia? There isn't much to do. "It's just a different sort of place," says the hotel manager. "They can hang out with the Germans and drink beer and eat schnitzel. They can go riding on a horse. Or they can rent a gun and go outside the town and do some shooting, although there's nothing out there you'd want to stuff and put over your mantel."

Czarcinski has a brainstorm for a tourist attraction, however — a sort of theme resort set up like a concentration camp. "You come for a week, let's say, and you have to sleep on a bare pallet and live on starvation rations. They put you to work doing something arduous and beat you if you don't cooperate. And there would be a fake gas chamber — just a lot of smoke, that's all. We could even make things kinky by tying the women to racks in their bras and panties and whipping them. But the Mennonites are against it, and they have the most power around here."

The Westin has some mysterious permanent residents, who occupy the top floor. I was told they were ex-Mennonites who left the community and fell in with the old Krauts. They have laptops and wireless Internet in their rooms, and they do things with money, but they won't say exactly what or for whom. So I suspect there is some sort of deep, dark secret in Filadelfia the world doesn't know about.

One of the old Krauts in the clique at Werner's claims to have participated in a secret Nazi polar expedition in 1938-39. He was an 18-year-old seaman aboard the research ship *Schwabenland,* commanded by Capt. Alfred Kothas. The expedition explored parts of Antarctica and brought back valuable scientific information. He showed me a naval patch with the words "Deutsche Antarktische Expedition" and the outline of Antarctica with a flag marking a region called "Neu-Schwabenland." The *Schwabenland* carried two flying boats called the "Boreas" and the "Passat."

Much to my delight, another Canadian writer arrived during my stay in Filadelfia. Lorette Luzajic, of Toronto, was on a promotional tour for her new book, *Weird Monologues for a Rainy Life (irreverent ramblings from the end of the world).* The hotel manager had invited her up from Asuncion in the hope of injecting some culture into Filadelfia, as well as promoting the place for tourism. However, he had conveniently neglected to tell her that there was no bookstore or library in town. But everything worked out fine anyway. When she went over to Werner's and the old Krauts found out she was of German ancestry, she immediately became everyone's "girlfriend." All the old buzzards took turns having her sit on their laps, and they all told her how beautiful she was and treated her like a goddess. She sold every copy of her book that she had brought with her and wished she had brought more. (Find out more about Lorette and her book at www.thegirlcanwrite.net.)

Filadelfia has a sister city in the U.S. (Would that be Philadelphia, by any chance?) You guessed it! Mayor Michael Nutter told me, "We don't have no Paraguanians here in Philly, but they're welcome to come over, as long as they pay their own way. We'll take 'em out for some good Philly steak sandwiches." This arrangement was made by Michael Czarcinski, of course, in the hope of stimulating tourism. He told me, "When you publish your article, the tourists will really start pouring in. Then

maybe I'll have enough clout to push that concentration camp idea through." Okay, good luck with that!

Recommended vaccinations: Rinderpest, Bowen Hutterite Syndrome, Chombley wart virus.

11. Pignon, Haiti

Your voodoo vacation awaits! You're going to the most terrifying tourist destination in the Caribbean — Pignon, Haiti! You'll see things you never thought could exist — like *zombies,* for instance! They're up there in the mountains. And when the sun goes down, the zombies come down to hunt for victims. Oh, so you don't believe in such things, do you? Neither did Father Antoine Laperriere, who was sent to Pignon by the government of Haiti in 1945 to establish a mission and suppress the practice of voodoo. He lasted only two days there and literally crawled out of town on his hands and knees. He claimed that invisible hands were constantly choking him. He lost his mind and eventually died in a lunatic asylum. But you're not afraid, are you? No, you'll go anyway. Just make sure you write your will first.

Pignon is a speck on the map, nestled in the interior mountainous region of Haiti. It's on the road between Hinche and Cap Haitien. There's one bus a day between those two towns. You have to ask the driver to stop at Pignon, otherwise he won't. He'll give you a shocked look. It's like asking to be dropped off in Newt, Texas, or at Castle Dracula. Be a sport. Slip him some money.

Now, I don't mean to exaggerate. *Most* tourists who go to Pignon return safely. Those who don't have probably been turned into zombies. But zombies don't mind being zombies. They're not aware that they're zombies. They're just like people in Toronto.

Pignon has one hotel — the Kawada. Manager John Marko has some advice for his guests: "Never go out by yourself. Never be out later than midnight. Don't look for hookers. Don't drink the local bitter tea. Take all your meals at the hotel."

Marko *does* believe in voodoo. "You don't have to be afraid of it. Just understand it. Voodoo can be black magic or white magic. Voodoo dolls and zombies are part of black magic. The zombie is in a kind of sleepwalking state. The *bokor,* who is a mercenary priest hired to do black magic, uses the toxin from the puffer fish *sphoeroides testudineus* in carefully measured doses to turn a person into a zombie and keep him like that. The toxin causes a near shut-down of the body and the loss of will. So the zombie can be ordered like a slave. Some zombies are just used for labor. Others are used to kill. You sometimes see them in broad daylight. The local people can pick them out instantly, but a tourist may not."

The voodoo ritual is the only thing worth seeing in Pignon. Tourists can observe it, but you have to give some money to the *houngan,* the voodoo priest (not quite the same as a *bokor*). The ritual is held in his house. A priestess, or *mambo,* is also likely to be present, along with one or more assistants, or *hounsis.*

The *houngan* begins by throwing some incense into a pot of red-hot coals on the floor. He may invoke good spirits or evil spirits, but not both at once. Good spirits are summoned if someone needs help; evil spirits are summoned if revenge or punishment is desired. In the latter case (which is far more interesting to watch), a large snake is brought in, and its head is cut off. The blood is collected in a bowl. A young girl, perhaps 16-18 years-old, is then made to undress and lie on a table. The snake blood is poured over her naked body. The *houngan* now takes a smoking pipe with tobacco in it, draws a mouthful of smoke, and blows it into the girl's vagina through a bamboo tube. Then a zombie is brought in. He is controlled by the *houngan.* The zombie sucks the nipples and vulva of the naked girl on the table, who must remain as still as possible. The zombie then lies on top of her for several minutes and rubs against her as if having intercourse with her (although he cannot). The *houngan* may now have intercourse with the *mambo* (either real or simulated). Afterwards, the zombie is returned to his place (usually a sort of closet). Now the *houngan* takes a doll or effigy representing the hated one and sticks it with pins and utters magic words. This guarantees that evil spirits will find the intended victim and (presumably) kill him. The *houngan* then leads the congregation in singing, dancing, and shrieking, and everyone goes quite crazy, jumping and gyrating wildly. The women can strip completely and dance naked. Jugs of rum or strong wine are passed around until everyone is quite drunk. The *hounsis* set off firecrackers and pound drums, and the *mambo* can touch any man she favors in a sexual manner. It's quite a show!

Pignon supplies over 90% of the authentic voodoo dolls used around the world. They are made by the Pignon Dollworks, whose workers are skilled craftsmen. They also make a small percentage of Mattel's Barbie dolls. In fact, Mattel will soon be bringing out a limited edition Voodoo Barbie, which will be manufactured exclusively in Pignon for distribution in the Caribbean market only.

Yes, you can buy a voodoo doll from the Dollworks — for about $20. However, hotel manager John Marko assured me that it doesn't work for just anyone; you have to be a properly trained voodoo practitioner.

The Kawada is a nice enough hotel — not luxurious, just basic. Rooms average about $30 per day, but meals are extra. Most credit cards are accepted. A big, ugly doorman keeps out zombies, beggars, and other undesirables. The housekeeping staff will sell you a charm of some sort to protect you. Of course, it's fake, but you'd better buy it to be nice, otherwise you may find something crawly in your bed. The chef is insane and may disregard your order and decide what you should eat. His food is actually pretty good. His specialty, however, is snake.

Most of the people in Pignon don't speak English, but you can probably get by with your high school French. Haitian French is pretty awful — just as bad as Quebec French.

Some celebrities have visited Pignon, including Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Marie Osmond, Gen. Colin Powell, Kobe Bryant, Jose Canseco, Don King, Tyra Banks, former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, Prof. Henry Louis Gates (Ph.D., Harvard; N.W.A., Congo), and Sacha Baron Cohen. (Cohen started acting like Ali G. at the voodoo ritual and very nearly got himself beaten up.)

A group of students from Muhlenberg College (Allentown, PA) visited Pignon recently to dig for fossils. Some of the local people tricked them with a dog's skull, telling them it came from an unknown species. The students took it home with them and probably still haven't figured out what it is.

Pignon has a sister city in the U.S. — Poughkeepsie, New York (pronounced *Puh-KIP-see*). Mayor John C. Tkazyik, who loves all minorities, wants "those poor Haitians" to know they have a friend in Poughkeepsie. He personally sent them a large "CARE package" containing several bottles of his favorite barbecue sauce, some shirts from Goodwill, a Jane Fonda workout video, some cheap toys made in China, a picture book about Dutchess County, New York, and a framed picture of himself. He is now referred to in Pignon as the "fils de pute" (some sort of title of respect, I imagine), and his picture is now in the hands of a *houngan.*

Recommended vaccinations: tropical sprue, Ollier Disease, leprosy.

12. Elbasan, Albania

Have I got a scoop for you! There will be big news coming out of Albania, but you're getting it from me first! You already know that Cher Bono's daughter, Chastity, who now calls herself Chaz, intends to get a sex change and marry her girlfriend. *And* they intend to have a baby with the help of a sperm donor. *Who will that sperm donor be?* Well, here's the scoop: the sperm donor will be Edison Begaj, of Elbasan, Albania!

The world's entertainment media will be crushing into the airport at Tirana, the capital of Albania, and they'll be stampeding over each other to be the first to shove a mike into the bushy moustache of the handsome gym teacher at Elbasan High School. In a matter of weeks, you'll be reading all about sperm donor Edison Begaj in your favorite gossip magazines, including such need-to-know tidbits as:

* how he got chosen over 47 other candidates!

* who found him!

* what Cher really thinks of him!

* his secret affairs with Britney Spears and Kourtney Kardashian!

* his links to the Albanian monarchy!

* his favorite hang-outs and getaways!

* how he crossed the Sahara Desert on foot — and why!

* his kinky sex life and secret vices!

* how to make him love you!

All that and more is coming to your local newsstand!

But for now, let's learn all about the exotic city of Elbasan, which is located about 25 miles southeast of Tirana, along the banks of the romantic Shkumbin River. It was here, in fact (right beside the river), that Regis Philbin was conceived during a night of poetic and breathless love. Today, artisanal gold miners pan the river for nuggets of gold, which are then sold to buy guns. After all, what is an Albanian without a gun? Preferably *two* guns. For, just like the two-headed eagle on the Albanian flag, the traditional Albanian wants to look in two directions at once, thereby ensuring that he will never be caught off guard. And his moustache must be big and bushy, for Albanians are proud of having the most masculine moustaches in the world. King Zog, the last ruling king, had a fine moustache, which was copied by aristocrats around the world. (The moustache was stolen from his grave in 1975, and its present whereabouts are unknown.)

The area around Elbasan was fought over many times in Albania's illustrious history (although no one is sure why), and control was finally wrested by ethnic Albanians from the Uzghurs in the 1780's. Today it is rich in Turkish, Italian, and Greek influences, along with a less desirable gypsy influence.

My host in Elbasan was Hotel Manager Gregory Lehman of the Renaissance Elbasan. He has an Albanian mother and returned to his roots after growing up in the U.S. The Renaissance is the only good hotel in Elbasan by American standards, although Lehman admits it's long overdue for a "refreshing." Security costs have been high, owing to occasional political unrest. All the staff are armed, and the front is reinforced to withstand a good-sized bomb. But there have been no incidents in well over a year.

Albanians are a friendly people, but in some ways odd. Here's how you shake hands in Albania: bow at the waist while sticking your forefinger up your nose. Then straighten up and shake forefingers. Ignore any snot. Don't be a wimp. Be a man. Snot never killed anyone. This is how we bond in Albania. Unfortunately, the World Health Organization has condemned this practice,which is the reason why Albania was for many years an isolated country with a suspicion of foreigners.

But that's changing fast. Now they want everyone to come on over and eat some kebabs, and dance to the music of the *cuica* (a stringed instrument), and buy souvenirs.

Tourists are really starting to dig Elbasan, according to Greg Lehman. The only negative is the gypsies. They're all pickpockets and scam artists. And they use their kids. One kid will go up to a tourist and distract him with some simple object, and another kid will come up from behind and lift the wallet, and then they'll run like hell. What can you do, put them in jail? Lehman's advice is to pick up the first kid immediately and throw him against anything hard or in front of a truck. "The worst punishment that can possibly happen is that you'll be told to pack up and go home. But usually the police don't do anything. They're on our side."

Elbasan is noteworthy for its donkey monorail, a transport system that is unique in the world. It was supposed to be a proper electric monorail, but because of political troubles, it ended up as a patchy network of unpowered rails with junked cars hanging underneath. There are ladders and platforms along the way, and you go up and climb into this car body (such as an East German Trabant), and it gets towed by a donkey on the ground wearing a big harness. The donkey is guided by a "transport worker," who wears a pale blue skirt, baggy white shirt, a fez, and soft white shoes with tassels. This uniform is called a *kefte* and dates back centuries, and to wear one is a mark of manliness and honor. The rail lines are mostly in the bombed-out sections of the city and basically go from nowhere to nowhere. Pay the transport worker whatever you like. Just remember that he gets no salary and has to feed his family, as well as the donkey.

Elbasan has lots of cheap little restaurants with garbled American names like Mcdoonald, Bulgar King, Windys, Techo Bell, and Kintky Fry Chiken. But all the food is the same — goat or lamb kebabs, rice, and lentil soup. The local brewery, Hoxha (pronounced *HO-jah)*, was blown up five years ago, so you have to take your chances with whatever unlabeled stuff the proprietor puts in front of you. It could be home-made or bootlegged. Hey, don't be a wimp. Just drink it like a man! (The

Renaissance serves proper beverages, depending on what the manager can get that day from his contacts.)

Shopping is limited to a few blocks on the main street. You can buy clothing, ice cream, cigarettes, and guns. Femi's, a large store of general merchandise, owned by Femi Rabi, resembles a 1960's Kresge, except for the anti-aircraft gun on the roof. Street vendors are everywhere with their bootlegged goods and local "arts and crafts," such as wallets that are the wrong size for your money.

Nostalgic pictures of King Zog and dictator Enver Hoxha can still be seen on the sides of buildings, marred by bullet holes. Politically, Albanians can't decide what they are any more. There is a small, die-hard Royalist faction that wants to put King Leka (Zog's son) on the throne, but he shaved his moustache during his years in exile and became too Western. Leka is 7 feet tall, lives in Tirana, and trades commodities.

Elbasan's most influential citizen is Agim Sufa, an aging cantaloupe mogul, who is occasionally seen riding through town in his armored limousine, shooting at gypsies from the back seat. The city's Mayor, Midat Canaj, is never around. He spends all his time on a yacht and shows up briefly when it's time to get re-elected — just like Adam Clayton Powell.

Elbasan's most noteworthy geographical feature is the large area of peat bogs east of the city. For centuries nobody knew what they really were — only that they weren't safe to walk on, and lots of drunks would wander out on them at night and sink in and die. But more recently, a proper scientific study was carried out by Prof. Erion Dulaj, of the Albanian Institute of Advanced Studies, in Tirana, who determined that they were, in fact, peat bogs. An archeological team did excavations and found well-preserved specimens of early man dating back to the Bronze Age, which they named "Elbasan Man." According to Prof. Dulaj, Elbasan Man was a hunter and gatherer, enjoyed sports, got along well with people, stayed up late, was kind to children, believed in family values, saved his money, and had a good sense of humor. One of these specimens of Elbasan Man now stands in the corner of a barber shop owned by Milan Mitic. He thinks of it as the son he never had.

Peat from the bogs is now used as fuel by the Chinese steel mills that impart a lovely brown color to the sky and add their fragrances to the fields of daffodils and petunias nearby. And a Chinese company is now processing vegetation from the bog for a new breakfast cereal called *Weedies.*

The unregulated development of Elbasan has taken its toll on the endangered Albanian marmoset, which has seen its habitat diminished relentlessly by deforestation and the building of a never-completed shopping mall. The mall's only tenant is the Albanian Army, which uses it as an armory and for training.

But the Shkumbin River is still clean enough for fishing. The river is home to the rare, delectable *jaraqui* fish, found nowhere else in the world. Elbasaners eat it fried, with salt and malt vinegar, out of large cone-shaped containers of stiff paper. (Gordon Ramsay gets $40 for one in London.) The fish is rich in selenium and chromates, which may explain why the average life span in Elbasan is 85 years (not including victims of crime, accidents, genocide, or suicide).

The river also has many large black slugs, which are said to cure cancer. Dr. Mjallaq Pergjika, one of Elbasan's outstanding physicians, has opened a clinic and now treats people from all over the world. He also sells his black slug cancer cure over the Internet.

Ask a taxi driver to take you to see the crop circles. Three circles about 30 feet in diameter appeared mysteriously one night in 2006 and still remain. They have never been explained. Did alien spacecraft land there? Did they abduct young women to serve as sex slaves? Hell, I would have.

Humpbacked zebu cattle graze around the charred stumps of new pastures, boys wearing team uniforms play soccer on an emerald field, and small but proud farmhouses nestle among fruit trees and flowers. A sign on a gas station reads, *"Hier Sprechts Deutsch."*

Summer is the time for the Elbasan Goat Festival. Farmers bring their goats in and show them off in a big corral to the admiring public before trucking them over to the slaughterhouse. The goats are slaughtered in the traditional Albanian way — a bullet in the head.

The ugliest goat, however, gets special treatment. Townsfolk decide which is the ugliest goat of them all, and this one is given the name of a hated person. (This year it was Ed Swiderski.) The goat is strangled by several strong boys, and then its head is smashed several times with a rock. To Elbasaners, the Ugly Goat is a symbol of everything bad, so killing it is supposed to bring good luck for the coming year.

Elbasan now has a sister city in the U.S. — Glencoe, California. Formerly known as Mosquito Gulch, Glencoe was a mining town long ago and is now an unincorporated town. Arrangements at their end were handled by State Assemblyman Tom Berryhill, who told me, "Make sure I get full credit for this." Okay, I just licked the stamp. Elbasan is happy about it, and Ahab Books, in Glencoe, is especially happy. Their manager told me, "Maybe now we can get rid of your books."

Before I left Elbasan, I had a farewell drink with Greg Lehman at the Renaissance. We watched a clique of transvestites in lingerie and fishnet hose making merry. "We're getting everything from the West now," said Greg. "This is the new Albania. Like the man says, 'Get used to it.'" I asked him what the local people thought about Chaz Bono getting a sperm donor from Elbasan. "Oh, it's the talk of the town! Funny thing is, everyone always assumed Edison Begaj was queer. And there are a few other things about him you ought to know…." But this is where I have to cut it short. I don't want to spoil things for all those entertainment journalists who have to make a living.

Recommended vaccinations: Dercum's Disease, toxoplasmosis, megaloblastic anemia.

13. Darvaza, Turkmenistan

Take me from the land of Oz,

Take me far away because

I want to get back to Darvaza,

Yes, I want to get back to Darvaza,

Darvaza, Turkmenistan,

That's…Darvaza, Turkmenistan.

Remember that one? The Atomic Bananas, 1957. If you were ever a mental patient in Toledo, you heard it a lot. Now you can't find it anywhere — not even on eBay.

In her book *Gurgling Brooks* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1929), world traveler Myrna McDougal describes her travels through central Asia, including her visit to Darvaza, in the Kara-Kum Desert of what is now Turkmenistan: *"From a distance, the Pillars of Gthoth rose majestically, framing the setting sun, which cast vivid beams of orange light across the flanks of the Schlegpeh Mountains. Overhead, great bats and eagles looped gracefully above the copper-red sands. The call of the hyena could be heard in all directions. And the faint aroma of boxwood and fox grass drifted like a dream over our camp. Our bearers (native Ayumyalas) told us their legends of how the world was created in this place, making it the center of the universe. The water in the oasis, they claimed, could give a camel great strength and give a human being visions of Paradise."*

Okay, so we know the water is really good. Throughout Turkmenistan, a popular saying is "he drinks the water at Darvaza," which explains why a person is acting weird or stoned.

To the locals, the place is always referred to as Darvaza Oasis, because historically, that's what it is. It has always been a resting place for merchants from all over central Asia, carrying a wide variety of goods. Caravans carried beans, rice, mushrooms, yogurt, potash, copper, marble, exotic birds, and umiak eye-glaze murder monkeys from Qarshi to Balkanabat; cedar, incense, dates, gourds, pineapples, girdles, hoses, paint, and gangster art retro pudding sponges from Herat to Novvy Uzen; chalk, gemstones, ladies' shoes, cosmetics, tubes, nails, springs, farina, and prison cockle subsonic bitchamooga from Uyuk to Qum; animal skins, candles, whips, lard, fireworks, shower curtains, board games, cheese, and harridan space zomba fruit gungles from Jamnagar to Sosnovka; lingerie, cigars, goat meat, kitchen utensils, patio furniture, iodine, tree bark, and marsupial smash hammerhead screaming skulls from Yarkand to Gurgan; and rum, party hats, office supplies, starch, glue, musical instruments, whale oil, carpets, peppers, ropes, dildoes, doilies, pumpkins, and gorgaleptic urine bipolar disorder winkies from Patchogue to Syosset.

But to the modern world, Darvaza was an unknown town of no particular interest — until 1971, *when a gateway to hell was opened!* An oil and gas company drilling for natural gas accidentally

punched into a gas-filled cavern. They decided to empty it by burning off the gas, believing it to be no more than a superficial pocket. The result was an explosion. The ground collapsed, leaving a crater 60 meters across, *which has been burning ever since!*

"Of course, it's not really a gateway to hell," explains Hotel Manager Amanda Hyndman of the Excelsior Darvaza. "But it's a great tag line for publicity. It's the only tourist attraction in the country outside of the capital. There'd be no hotel here without the crater of fire." The Excelsior offers a good view of the crater, which is about two miles away. Of course, local people are so used to it, they scarcely look at it any more, even though much of the town owes its livelihood to it.

Why has no one tried to put out the fire after all these years? According to Hyndman, it could theoretically be put out. "You'd have to bring up a bunch of bulldozers from the capital, but it's a long trip on a bad road. And people here don't particularly want to put it out." But what about the effect on the environment? "What environment?" says Hyndman. "This is a bleeping desert."

Tourists are generally led out on foot in the daytime. They'll stand around the crater while the tour guide gives a talk, and then after a half hour or so, they leave. It's more impressive at night, but if you go then, you'll find yourself stepping among a profusion of big, ugly spiders. They're harmless but gross.

Local businesses exploit the crater as a theme: Gates of Hell Ice Cream Shop, Fire Crater Cinema, Hellgate Massage Parlor, Crater Gas Station, Hellfire Donuts, and Kemal's Crater of Fire Kebabs (which serves extremely spicy goat kebabs). The local high school calls its sports teams the Fireflies. (Unfortunately, they have no one else to play against, because Darvaza is so remote.) And all up and down the main street, you will find a predictable assortment of souvenirs, including post cards, videos, DVD's, and t-shirts that say *"My friends went to Darvaza, and all they brought back was this lousy t-shirt,"* along with a picture of the fiery crater.

According to geologists, the fire could burn itself out at any time or go on burning indefinitely, so the government of Turkmenistan is reluctant either to spend the money to put it out or to invest heavily in the development of Darvaza as a tourist attraction. Some people are in favor of diversifying the economy; others worry that if the fire goes out, any money invested will be wasted.

Elsewhere in Turkmenistan, other towns want to have a crater of fire, too. Geologists say similar gas deposits could exist. But the government is afraid of scam artists showing up. (Like this: "For twenty thousand dollars, I'll give you a crater of fire like Darvaza. I know where to dig.") I know some Vancouver stock promoters who would jump on that opportunity!

Some environmental busybodies from France showed up at Darvaza and made a fuss about the fire polluting the environment, and they were going to make a complaint to the U.N. They disappeared mysteriously and have never been heard or seen since. (Never get up other people's noses when you're in the middle of a desert, okay?)

A few celebrities have visited Darvaza, which always excites the locals. Brad Pitt got stoned and tried to piss in the crater and almost fell in, but he was saved in the nick of time by a baker's helper, who was following him. Pitt swore the boy to secrecy about the incident.

David Beckham was here to try his luck at Turkmen foot-and-elbow fighting, a martial art peculiar to Turkmenistan. There's a big vacant lot behind the Crater Gas Sation, and young men go there for some foot-and-elbow fighting when they're bored. Really skinny guys seem to have an advantage in this sport. Beckham was invited to take on the local champ, who was built like a bean pole, and after allowing the boy to score some points, he knocked him out cold. Beckham wasn't sure if the crowd was going to turn on him or not, but after a few seconds of shocked silence, the onlookers cheered. So now David Beckham is unofficially the foot-and-elbow fighting champion of Darvaza, Turkmenistan. (In a lot of Muslim countries, they probably would have cut his head off.)

Paris Hilton was also in Darvaza to obtain a purebred Turkmen Alabai dog. Muslims generally don't like dogs, but the Alabai is greatly admired in Turkmenistan because it is very good at killing snakes, Communists, and homosexuals. Hilton found one she liked and took it home with her. (And don't get any ideas. Unless you're as rich and well-connected as she is, getting a purebred Alabai in the U.S. is next to impossible.)

Tourism in Darvaza has been growing gradually, and the increased revenue has led to a few improvements at least. The bus station has been modernized to include two flush toilets and air-conditioning. The main street has been paved, and parking meters have been installed (although they are generally used to tie donkeys and camels). An outdoor tennis court has been built (wrong dimensions), as well as a go-cart track and mini-golf. And the Turkmenistan government has built a new prison to house the worst criminals in the country. It has a courtyard with a guillotine and a public seating area for the viewing of executions.

Foreign capital is cautiously dipping its toes into Darvaza to take advantage of its cheap labor. Chinese companies are now manufacturing silly putty, pet toys, guns, and glow-in-the-dark shoelaces for the central Asian market. And Tata Motors intends to set up a factory to build a three-wheeled car called the Firebug. It will be rugged enough for bad roads, and it will get 50 miles a gallon on any fuel, including cooking grease. And if it tips over, one person can set it back up.

There is no official local civil authority or police force in Darvaza. Instead, the local mullah, Mohammed Orospu Cocugu, who is blind, and his four retarded sons keep the peace as they see fit. They've got their own system, and it works, and you can't criticize it, otherwise you're an ethnocentric bigot.

Darvaza High School offers the only correspondence course for shepherds in the entire world. It is recognized for academic credits in the Province of Ontario, and student aid is available to immigrants with long, unpronounceable names.

And another highly visible public work is planned for Darvaza, in case the crater of fire should go out. Architect Bayram Shamuradov has been commissioned by the government to erect a 100-foot-tall "Spider Tower." It will have blinking green lights at night, and visitors will be able to climb to the top

and take pictures of the desert (or whatever). It will be built entirely from scrap metal scavenged from abandoned gas wells.

Darvaza now has a sister city, and you'll never guess where! No, it's not in the U.S., or in Canada either. It's in Australia! The town of Coober Pedy, South Australia, is Darvaza's sister city. Coober Pedy is the opal capital of the world. Most of its residents live underground. And from the air, it looks just like Darvaza! Mayor Steve Baines is delighted with the arrangement. "They're in a desert, and we're in a desert. They have ugly spiders, and so do we. So it's a perfect match!" Baines still gets confused between Turkey and Turkmenistan, but that's okay. He's just thrilled that I would give his town international recognition on my blog page. He would also like me to explain to everyone that he is not that seriously into cross-dressing ("just once in a while at a party to get a laugh," he insists).

Amanda Hyndman says the Excelsior is pretty desperate for business since natural gas prices fell off a cliff (the hotel gets half its business from the oil and gas industry), so tourists can expect stupidly cheap deals. By September, the worst of the heat is over, and by December, there are almost no spiders.

Recommended vaccinations: Binswanger's Disease, vesicular stomatitis, choroideremia.

14. Goma, Congo (DRC)

Hey, all you hot and horny singles! We're going to party! We're taking a trip to — wait for it — GOMA…CONGO! Bring your friends! If you don't have any friends, you'll make some when you get there.

Now, let's be clear on which Congo we're talking about, because there are two of them. We're talking about the *big* one — the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The good old DRC. And any country that calls itself the Democratic Republic of whatever has got to be a great tourist destination. (Remember how much fun we had in North Korea? Scroll back to June 11 if you missed it.)

The other Congo is that little wiener country on the left that's shaped like a turd. That one's called the Republic of the Congo, or "Congo-Brazzaville," which is only known for the song *Brazzaville Teenager,* written by Bruce Jay Friedman. It's populated mainly by mincing fairies, not like the big black studs in the DRC, whose grandfathers stripped the rubber off trees with machetes way back when. These are the kind of men chicks go for. So it's no surprise that loads of single women flock to the DRC to meet the sort of big, hard masculine men they can't meet here in North America (we won't count retarded Hispanics). And Goma is the magnet that draws them, because it's always been known for its night life and singles scene.

An air-conditioned luxury bus will take you from Goma's international airport to the front entrance of the Novotel Citygate Goma, managed by Rod Munro. Rod numbers among his friends such celebrities as Chris Brown, Ozzie Osbourne, Rachael Ray, Johnny Depp, Sen. John Edwards, Ashton Kutcher, Kevin Federline, Venus Williams, John McEnroe, and Dr. Phil McGraw, all of whom have stayed at the Novotel. (Paul Bernardo also stayed here a long time ago, but he's not a friend.) Rooms run from $275-$475 a night, but there are package deals available from several online travel websites. Many suites are decorated with romantic Valentine themes. Nicole Richie and Joel Madden spent a week in the most expensive suite and went through endless bottles of pink champagne and a mountain of caviar.

Rod was too busy to show me around, so he turned me over to his good friend Mutiat Titiola Olubi, who owns the DRC's biggest magazine publishing company, Modern Congo, Ltd. Her stable of magazines includes *Modern Congo Homemaker, Modern Congo Beauty and Fashion, Modern Congo Gardener, Modern Congo Single, Modern Congo Woman, Modern Congo Business, Modern Congo Health and Fitness,* and *Modern Congo Mercenary.* Because of my reputation as the funniest living writer in the English language, "Muti," as she prefers to be called, was only too happy to take some time off to be my tour guide. She enjoys the single life and the glamor of a vibrant, cosmopolitan city like Goma. "Kinshasa is bigger, but it's dull. Goma is the happening place in the DRC." And most of what is happening is in the district known as the Magumba Quarter, which reminds me of the Yonge Street strip in Toronto in the 70's, before immigration turned it into a sewer of imbecility.

Did you know that Goma is the comedy capital of Africa? Bet you didn't. The Magumba Quarter is famous for its comedy clubs, where up-and-coming stars hone their skills before moving on to the big clubs in North America and Europe. (What famous comic with initials C.R. has been hiding his Congo roots for years?) At the Club Ebola, we caught an act by Benjamin Okey Ahuama (don't change that name!), who was hilarious. Here's one of his jokes: Mike Tyson goes into a supermarket looking for rapeseed oil. He goes to the aisle with the cooking oils, where a stock girl is stocking shelves. He can't find rapeseed oil, so he says to the girl, "Don't you got no fuckin' rapeseed?" The girl says, "I don't even know what that is." "You don't know what rapeseed is?" "No," says the girl. And Tyson says, "Bitch, I'm gonna *show* you what rapeseed is!" The crowd couldn't stop laughing over that one! (Congo is the rapeseed capital of the world, so that's why the joke works so well there. In the West we call rapeseed "canola" — I guess because we don't like to call things by their proper names.)

Mike Tyson, by the way, is the biggest celebrity in the DRC, even though he's never been there. He's so popular they even renamed the Virunga National Park the Mike Tyson National Park. The park, which is not far from Goma, is the home of endangered mountain gorillas, and it has almost as many monkeys as Los Angeles. It is also the home of Murray, the Congo Wonder Dog, a cartoon character in a rare, collectible comic book by Robert Crumb .

A great place to eat in Goma is the Mkundu Restaurant, owned by Eustace Kwarko Adjepong, who is also the head chef. The specialty of the house is rapeseed-fried fish, served on a bed of rapini. Fresh fish is supplied daily from nearby Lake Kivu. Ratfish is very popular, as well as striped burrfish and cabezon. Congo truffles are also on the menu, and they are as good as the most expensive truffles from France.

The Magumba Quarter buzzes with activity all night with clubs catering to singles. The music is loud, the drinks are strong, and the women dress for sex. Wet t-shirt contests are the latest craze. (*Girls Gone Wild* will be putting out a video produced in Goma.) The college students from Kinshasa flock to Goma during spring break. The hottest club is Disco Mbwajike. You'll see people lined up around the block to get in. (Dress like a pimp or a whore and slip the doorman a fiver, and you'll get in a lot faster.) It's a good place to score drugs, and the police never set foot in the place. The owner is Mpindi Mbunga, who has a cousin with the same name in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mbunga says that a lot of Congolese trace their ancestry back to America and should therefore be referred to as "Americo-Africans."

Goma also has its own Oktoberfest (in October, of course), which is a bit of the old Belgian influence. (The DRC used to be a colony of Belgium, and don't they wish they had it back!) The favorite beer is *Leopoldbrau* (in honor of King Leopold II of Belgium, of course). Goma really swells with visitors during the Oktoberfest — especially visitors from Rwanda. Goma is right on the Rwandan border, and Rwandans love Goma for its night life, hot women, and great shopping.

Goma is right on the shore of Lake Kivu, and the lake is a great attraction for its natural beauty, clean water, fishing, and speedboat racing. The Lake Kivu speedboat races have become a big event, and

ABC is planning to televise them. The current reigning champ is David Sunkwah Yeboah, who is sponsored by Castrol.

About 20 kilometers north of Goma is the majestic Nyiragongo Volcano, which is a great climb for an experienced climber. The volcano is active, however, and every few years it erupts and makes life interesting for people in Goma. The lava flows are picturesque, and if you're a boomer, you go, "Oh, wow! Psychedelic!" And you put on a Ravi Shankar album and get stoned and watch the lava go by. And when it cools, you can go out and collect nice, fluffy pumice, which you can wash with and not pollute the environment with soapy chemicals. And then you can make carvings out of the pumice and sell them by the side of the road so you can live frugally in a commune and not have to conform and be a wage slave and pay taxes for the Evil War Machine. And if the lava destroys your little house, you just build another one and don't get angry with Mother Nature, who is just doing her thing. The volcano is the result of the Congo tectonic plate subsiding into the Sub-Saharan tectonic plate, leading to a metamorphic fractal collusion. This phenomenon was illuminated poignantly in David McFadden's book *A Trip Around Lake Kivu* (Coach House Press, 1990).

The Ebola River lends its name to lots of stores and businesses in Goma, such as Ebola Pizza, Ebola Escorts, Ebola Cinema, and the Ebola Candy Company, which is famous for its licorice women. Of course, when most people hear the name "Ebola," they think of Ebola virus. And it's true that the Ebola virus originated in the Ebola River region, but that's more than 500 miles away from Goma, so there's no need to worry. (Ebola virus got started by jigaboos fucking chimpanzees, but we shouldn't criticize them, because white people have spread some diseases, too.)

Goma now has a "sister city" in Canada — Ottawa. Mayor Larry O'Brien loves the new arrangement. "We need some Congo people in Ottawa. We need their spiritual purity. We've got lawyers who can get them in as refugees. They'll like it here," he says. And he points out the similarities between the two cities. Both cities are on a border. Goma is right across the road from Gisenyi, Rwanda, and Ottawa is right across the river from Hull, Quebec. And, like Goma, Ottawa is the comedy capital of Canada. O'Brien's wife, Colleen McBride, was actually born in the DRC, in the village of Bunia. The Mayor and his wife like to visit the DRC whenever they can. The Mayor finds some public official to have lunch with, he calls it official business, and Ottawa City Council pays for it.

Before I left, I had a nice dinner with Rod Munro, and we talked about the bad press the DRC has gotten and whether it's a safe place for Americans to visit. "It's safe," he insists. "Americans have no problem here. *However*...there is one person who must never set foot in the DRC." And who might that be? "Michael Moore. There's a tribe here called the Jambazi, and they practice cannibalism, and they have a major cannibal hard-on for Michael Moore. I met their leader, Kuchigku Bunga. He told me, 'We gonna cook and eat de big fat man Michael Moore. He feed de whole village.'" There's no obvious explanation why the Jambazi have selected him. Maybe it's just the way he looks. They just want to eat him. According to Munro, the Jambazi have a plan to lure Michael Moore to the Congo on some pretext of doing a documentary. And once he's in their clutches, he's dinner. Well, I, for one, would not be sorry.

Recommended vaccinations: elephantiasis, leptospirosis, Forbes Disease.

15. Pisagua, Chile

Do you mind if I take you to the driest desert in the world? Don't worry. I won't let you die (unless you're an anti-capitalist protester). I'm one of the world's experts on desert survival. Just read my article "How To Survive In The Sahara Desert" at www.pointsincase.com.

But we're not going to the Sahara. We're going to a secret place — hidden, remote, mysterious — a place where time stands still, as if in a dream. It has been compared (inaccurately) with Michael Jackson's Neverland. Exotic animals roam freely, and men lost in deep thought step in their shit. It is situated on the fabled Coast of Pirates, near the northern tip of Chile. It is the "Miracle of the Atacama" — the exotic city of Pisagua, Chile.

No one knows how old this city really is, for it is built on ancient Inca ruins that have never been accurately dated. The descendants of the Incas lived here in the Golden Age of Pirates. They traded with all the legendary pirates, including Blackbeard, Calico Jack, Henry Morgan, Captain Kidd, and Bill Mazeroski. The inhabitants of Pisagua traded borax, which they mined in the desert. The pirates used it for their laundry. In return, the pirates traded colored beads of little value, because the local people were not good in business. This may offer a clue as to why the Inca empire collapsed.

All along the coast north and south of Pisagua, the pirates are reputed to have buried caches of treasure. They have never been found. But adventurers still try their luck, walking the beaches with their metal detectors. Rogues have sold numerous maps over the years purporting to show the location of treasure, but all have been denounced as fakes. Does this mean there is no treasure? No. The coast is still largely unexplored.

Fly to Arica, Chile, and leave that crowd of tourists behind and take the bus south to Pisagua — a place usually bypassed. There is one good hotel — the Waldorf Astoria Pisagua, which is moderately priced. Its General Manager is Dirk De Cuyper, to whom the Atacama Desert is like heaven. "For years I worked in Shanghai," he says, "but I got sick and tired of being surrounded by slitty-eyed Chinese bastards. You're from Toronto, so you know exactly what I mean. My soul longed for the desert — but not one with any Muslim bastards either. The Atacama beckoned to me in my dreams. I don't know why, but I just had to come here. It's the driest desert in the world, you know. Dead bodies that are left exposed don't decompose. They just dry up like mummies. The landscape on the other side of the highway is as bleak as the moon. What hotel manager wouldn't love a place like this?" Enough said. Rent me a suite long-term!

The Waldorf Astoria Pisagua used to be a prison. When Pinochet overthrew Allende, he banished thousands of Commie bastards to the north of Chile, and most of them died there. The prison at Pisagua was eventually closed, and Waldorf Astoria bought it and turned it into a hotel. (Big secret: Waldorf Astoria is going to buy Alcatraz and turn it into a luxury resort! You heard it here first!) Renovating it would be a challenge, so the company gave the job to the famous Mexican designer Carlos Raul Gil Barragan, whose TV show, *Prison Makeover,* is distributed internationally on satellite

by Televisa Networks. The basic boxy layout was left as is, but the interior spaces are cleverly broken up with mirrors, partitions, and windows, along with avant-garde furniture and unusual wall paint. So the eye fails to see the right angles and sort of slides over things instead. It's a bit like the stealth profiles of modern warships, which scatter radar and are almost invisible. I'm going to buy one and get close to a Greenpeace ship and blast it out of the water.

The hotel is known for its excellent spa, which makes use of natural deposits of borax, iodine, and nitrates. These minerals dissolved in the hot water rejuvenate the skin and cure arthritis. They also cure eating disorders. Kelly Ripa, Victoria Beckham, and Tori Spelling have all been to the spa and have benefited from it.

The Waldorf Astoria Pisagua also has quite a good restaurant. Dirk De Cuyper gives all the credit to his Head Chef, Roberto Aguayo Briseno. "He just showed up out of the blue and said he wanted to cook. I didn't know anything about him, but I decided to give him a chance. He's brilliant. He could be working in Paris or Rome or London, but I've got him here in Pisagua, Chile." Chef Roberto's specialty is llama stew. Here's the recipe:

Remove head from llama and send it to PETA, along with a note telling them to shove it up their ass. Clean carcass and carve out large rump portion. Also save blood and liver. Cut rump into two-inch pieces and put in large pot and cover with equal parts of water and white wine. Add sliced carrots, coarsely-chopped onions, a bouquet garni with plenty of thyme in it, a tablespoon of salt, and two tablespoons of peppercorns. Let stand for 48 hours, then drain and remove meat to a platter. In a large frying pan place one-half pound butter and a half cup of flour, and stir over medium heat. Add pieces of llama and simmer for ten minutes; then add the juice from the original pot and a glass of water or bouillon, bring to a boil, cover, and simmer slowly. Separately, parboil and fry in olive oil two cups of pearl onions, and a half-pound of salt pork in half-inch squares. After 1 1/2 hours of simmering the meat, add the onions, pork, and a cup of mushrooms, and continue simmering for another 1/2 hour. Chop the liver fine, mix with the blood, and stir into the stew just before removing from the stove. Don't let the liver boil. Season to taste and serve with a sprinkle of chopped parsley.

Of course, llama is probably not available where you live, so you'll just have to come down to Pisagua to enjoy this dish.

Llamas roam freely in this part of Chile, and they're seen all the time by the writers and artists in the "colony" outside of town. This is what I was referring to in the introduction when I mentioned men lost in thought stepping in animal shit. These artists and writers rent little cabins for next to nothing, and they have a quiet place to be creative. There are about two dozen cabins scattered in the desert between the town and the Pan American Highway.

But according to Dirk De Cuyper, the current lot of writers and artists is rather suspicious. "These guys don't look or act like writers and artists. When they come into town, they don't want to talk to anyone. What are they writing? What are they painting? They're evasive. They could be wanted criminals, for all I know."

I got curious, so I went over to the Elbow Room, the town's main drinking place, to try to meet some of these people. The bartender pointed out two of them for me. "That one's a poet, and the other one's a painter," he said, indicating two scruffy, sullen-looking guys with hats pulled down over their faces. So I went over to them, I said I was a Canadian writer, and I asked to see some of their work. One fellow gave me a suspicious look, then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of paper that was soiled and yellow with age. It was a photocopy of a poem:

Dialogue of Deaf Persons

–Are you an American?

–No, I am another.

–Are you a tourist?

–No, I am two ones,

for I'm not alone but with me.

–What o'clock is it?

–It is seven o'clock ben.

–Yes, it's seven o'clock at my sock.

I knew the poem was a plagiarism, and I knew who the poet was. "Very interesting," I said. "What have *you* got?" I asked the other one.

The "artist" gave me a twisted grin and pulled a much-traveled paper out of his pocket. "I'm still working on it," he said, his rotten teeth showing. It was obviously a tracing of an illustration from a magazine ad for a mail order art school.

"That's very good," I said politely.

"Thank you," he said.

Later, I took a long walk out to the area of the colony and discovered a bank of mailboxes by the road where these people picked up their mail. I wrote down some names for the benefit of the morbidly curious: Gabriel Tapia-Lemus, Ramiro Hernandez Lucatero, Alberto Molina Infante, Martin Moreno Oseguera,Galindo Nunez Melgoza, and Ismael Rios-Gallardo. Those are certainly great names for artists and writers. Maybe my suspicions and Dirk De Cuyper's are all wrong.

I spent a lot of time at the Elbow Room, which is mainly a fishermen's hangout. The fishermen go out for tuna, skate, pollock, and herring. Sea lions can also be seen from the window of the tavern, cavorting in the surf, but they are protected by law. The fishermen drink a local liquor called *cara de cona.* I asked what it was made from, and they laughed and said, "You don't need to know. Just drink it." This is the sort of place where you're apt to get beaten up for ordering a banana daiquiri. (Just ask Adam Lambert. He'll never come back.)

Because Pisagua is not yet well known to tourists, visitors can enjoy a relatively uncrowded beach. A few boats will take tourists out for a day of fishing. Otherwise, there are no special attractions. Main drawback: no hot babes anywhere in sight. This beach needs help.

The only day tour you can go on is a bus ride out to the salt flats, where you can watch flocks of flamingos and puffins next to each other. This is the only place in the world where these species are found together. On the way back, you will stop at an abandoned borax mine, where hundreds of dead bodies of prisoners are stacked on pallets. They're absolutely dry. Now, *that* is the sort of tourist attraction you're not going to find anywhere else!

The night sky is brilliant with stars (northern Chile has the best viewing conditions in the world), and the local astronomy club likes to set up their telescopes and let tourists have a look (remember to give the boys a tip). It was here in Pisagua, in fact, that Comet Pelotudo 2005 was first identified. This comet is now believed to be correlated to the appearance of the 17-year locust, a discovery which, if confirmed, would be "of immense importance to mankind," according to David Suzuki's housekeeper. The comet is also unique for its violet color and approximately rectangular orbit.

You know by now that I try to find "sister cities" for my Exotic Cities. In searching for a sister city for Pisagua, I looked for a place in or near a desert, and one that I felt deserved the same sort of tourist boost as Pisagua. And I found it: Halls Creek, Western Australia, on the northern edge of the Great Sandy Desert. I was unable to reach Council President Jim Craig of the Shire of Halls Creek, but I was able to reach Warren Olsen, the CEO of the Council. "I'm the guy who gets things done around here!" he shouted over the phone. "The Members of Council are a bunch of useless, do-nothing slackers! I'm the one who keeps Halls Creek from sinking straight down to the earth's core!" Olsen never heard of Pisagua, but the deal was done in less than five minutes. "That's how I do things! Just do it! Bang! If you were dealing with the Councillors, it would never get done! So you tell those Pisagua people, if they need something done here in Halls Creek, talk to me! And another thing. Who do you think got the toilets fixed around here? I did! And who gets the payroll done? I do! And who sends out the tax bills? I do!…" I love this guy. He has a hostile, authoritarian personality, just like me. Give guys like us some real power, and then step out of the way! Nuke the homeless!

Before I left Pisagua, Dirk De Cuyper told me about the town's biggest mystery — a series of little signs that suddenly appeared by the side of the road about fifteen years ago, long before he came to Pisagua. "They apparently were put up overnight, but nobody knows who did it or why, and the locals have never understood them. You'll see them on your way out, on the right side of the road, just before you get to the Pan American. They're spaced about a hundred feet apart. They're easy to miss if you're not paying attention, and the lettering has gotten bleached by the sun and is pretty faint. But you can still read them." De Cuyper refused to tell me any more, but from his smile I inferred that he fathomed this mystery that the locals couldn't. So, on my departure by bus, I made sure to get a window seat on the right side. And, sure enough, I saw the signs:

When morning sun…

Shines on your head…

Forget your job…

Go back to bed…

Burma Shave.

Recommended vaccinations: parvovirus, nemaline myopathy, Eales Disease.

16. Cotabato City, Philippines

Imagine yourself standing at the mouth of a great river, looking out at the sea. Through the mist you can see two islands, Imaklik and Inaklik. On a nearby pebble spit, native Yukaghirs cook walrus meat beside their *yarangas,* their *baydars* stacked neatly against a giant sequoia. The wind blows the mosquitoes out to sea, leaving the eland and moose free to nibble the wild beets and scallions unmolested. The sound of the *crwth* can be heard, along with a maiden singing in a strange language. Floats made of inflated seal stomachs drift in the river, while overhead a flock of cassowaries fly toward their nesting grounds in the Arakamchechen Peninsula. The sea, the sky, and the land are pure, clean, and peaceful. Guess where you are….No, not Moncton, New Brunswick! You're in Cotabato City, Philippines!

Book your trip on Philippine Airlines and pay with your American Express Card, and your recommended vaccinations will be free. Depart from Vancouver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Las Vegas, and fly to Manila, then change planes to Awang Airport, which serves Cotabato City. Look for the pink luxury bus that says "Raffles Cotabato." That's your hotel.

Nicholas Emery, the General Manager, runs the poshest inn in the city. Expect to pay about $275 a night (or if you go during the typhoon season, there's a 50% discount). The Raffles touch is unmistakable: Lost Continent seagrass carpet, faux-penguin-skin headboards, petticoat-shaped chandeliers with multicolored lasers, vibrating bamboo bimbo rocker, digitized stereo spider monkey screeching from within the walls and ceiling, Spanish Inquisition brocade wall hangings, giant cactus pedestal, spacecraft-style transformer shelves with wheelchair assist, voice-activated hand-shaped entertainment pods, sandstone bathroom with jungle canopy, *objets d'art* imported from South Moluccas, Baroque combination desk/bar/coffee table/drug station, robot mini-fridge and rare earth ceramic stove ensemble, oversize walk-in closet with Victorian gynecology sex chair, replica Corinthian spitoon, Lunar Receiving Lab environmental control system with Rocketdyne bug zapper, and Siberian-style gulag party bed, flanked by *avant garde* waterfall from the House of Szemetlada (Oroszlany, Hungary). Nick Emery is the author of the children's book *Tomaso, the Unhappy Potato Beetle,* and he is the godfather of Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

My host for this visit was Butch Bustamonte, who is the head of the John Ashley Fan Club. John Ashley, star of *Frankenstein's Daughter* and other B movies, is idolized in Cotabato City since he produced several movies in this part of the Philippines, including *Beast of Blood, Twilight People,* and *Mad Doctor of Blood Island.* There's a monument to the handsome actor in the city's park, and Butch took me to see it. It's a fine life-size statue depicting John Ashley as he appeared in *High School Caesar* (probably his best film), surrounded by a well-manicured bed of crocuses and Venus flytraps. The monument is cared for by Cotabato City's civic organization, the Spitola Dumbasa. The "SD," as it is referred to, also runs a cake-decorating school for ex-convicts and sponsors the annual Philippines National Spitting Championships, in which boys compete in various spitting skills.

"John loved the caves. They're the main attraction of the city," said Butch. He was referring to the Kutawato Caves, a long underground network right under the city. No other city in the world has such a feature. Don't bring the kids on this outing, because the caves are 7 km long. It's pretty spooky down there, even with the lighting. I thought of a good tag line for promoting the caves: *Feel the Evil.* Butch laughed and said it was a good one and he'd suggest it to the City Council. I noticed there were numerous passages that were roped off, and Butch explained that those areas were unsafe. However, there had always been rumors — call it an urban myth, if you like — that those roped-off passages led to the underground caves of an ancient race called the Deroes, who may still be alive. Mysterious disappearances of people and animals have been attributed to the Deroes, including Amelia Earhart and Gordon Brown's pet hamster. Butch said John Ashley always believed that the caves led to something the government didn't want people to know about. The caves also have a lot of bats. Khloe Kardashian and Lamar Odom visited the caves, because Khloe, like her sisters, is fascinated by cave bats. Odom hated every minute of the tour, according to Butch, and couldn't wait to get out.

After the cave tour, Butch took me to eat at a fancy restaurant called Putanginamo, which specializes in zebra mussels, a delicacy for which Cotabato City is famous. Head Chef Cornelio Cuevas-Pena is the originator of Zebra Mussels Cotabato, and here's the recipe:

For the Sauce Cotabato, put four ounces of butter and three spoonfuls of flour in a saucepan and heat until smooth. Add one cup of eel broth, bring to a boil, and mix in three egg yolks and a can of evaporated milk. Add a half teaspoon of cayenne pepper, one chopped clove of garlic, and the pulp of three or four moonseed fruits. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes. For the zebra mussels, wash first to remove grit, then put in casserole with four ounces of white wine and one cup of water. Bring to a boil, add six chopped shallots, and boil until mussels are open. Remove the mussels to another vessel and strain the broth. Serve on the half shell with the Sauce Cotabato and a side of french fries.

The South Seas Mall, which opened in 2005, draws a lot of tourists, although it is plain and unremarkable by Western standards. You may prefer the funkier old shopping district downtown, with its odd boutiques. Kulangot T-Shirts, owned by Ramiro Villagrana, specializes in "mistake" t-shirts with unrecognizable faces and misspelled slogans. They will custom-print anything you want on a t-shirt. Pokpok, owned by Marin Agudelo, sells local handicrafts such as eelskin wallets and handbags, burqas for Muslim women, and a wide assortment of personal care products that failed safety tests in other countries. And Braulio's Sex Shop, owned by Braulio Soto-Loera, specializes in Filipino porn, which is heavy on exploitation and violence (and you don't even mind that the Filipina women are flat-chested).

The biggest surprise of my trip was walking into a dimly-lit second-hand bookstore and finding a worn copy of my 1980 classic, *Lightning Struck My Dick.* I bought it as a gift for Nick Emery for $2, since he has a weird sense of humor. You can try looking for this book (and my other ones) at www.abebooks.com, which serves the collector's market, but don't blame me for the high prices.

The theatre district had two hit plays running while I was there — *Cebu Boo-Boo,* a musical comedy about life in a Filipino prison, and *Shoes,* a musical about Imelda Marcos.

One item you won't find in any tourist guide, however, is the Washday Problems Center (note the American spelling), which is a CIA front located in a nondescript building above some stores. I promised the Agency not to reveal the location. If you should happen to find your way in, you will see people in white smocks doing laundry. They're testing laundry products, ha, ha. The man in charge is named Mike, and he says he's from Syracuse. No, I won't tell you what these people are really doing.

Cotabato City is steeped in religious tradition. Filipinos have always been extreme in their religious devotion, and there is no better example than the Good Friday "Procession of Flagellation," in which devout Christians drag heavy crosses and whip themselves with flails until their backs are bloody. The procession begins on Ecorse Road at the St. Rodan Church (named after the patron saint of virgins seeking husbands in the U.S., which rules out all Russian and East European women), then goes along Washtenaw Avenue, then along Packard Road, Geddes Road, and Textile Road, arriving finally at Jollibee, where everyone has milk shakes and burgers. Street vendors will try to sell you souvenir whips, but they are poorly-made Chinese crap that falls apart after one or two uses (big surprise), not like the authentic Western-style horsewhips I use on that Socialist bitch Olivia Chow, who likes severe ass whipping. (Hazel McCallion used to be into that but now says she's too old.)

I should mention that nutrias roam freely in Cotabato City, and tourists are always alarmed because they mistake them for giant rats. These big rodents are quite friendly and gentle, and it's okay to let your kids play with them.

There are a lot of Muslims in Cotabato City, but they're just as benign as the nutrias, so don't worry.

Speaking of Muslims, Cotabato City now has a "sister city" with a Muslim Mayor — Luton, England. Mayor Muhammad Riaz has come a long way since the days when he stuck windshields on Vauxhalls at the local auto factory. Now he's the Mayor of "Britain's best town" (according to a survey). He's eager to network with the prominent Muslims in Cotabato City and find out about such things as e-mail security, banking laws, and the police. "We can help each other," he says. And he doesn't mind admitting that he's ambitious. "So I'm a pushy Paki. What of it? Today Luton, tomorrow the world…..Don't print that." England was once such a great country. You can read about it in books.

Somewhere in the U.S. there is a Dr. Jeffrey Brown, who was a dead ringer for John Ashley when he was a young man. Every time I see a picture of Ashley, I think I'm looking at Jeffrey. If you think you know him, ask him if he went to Syosset High School and if he remembers his next-door neighbor.

Recommended vaccinations: dracunculosis, cholinergic urticaria, Yunis Varon Syndrome.

17. Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua

A potato-hungry Nicaragua can be grateful for a city like Puerto Cabezas. This lovely little port on the Atlantic coast is surrounded by vast potato farms, which grow 80% of the potatoes eaten in Nicaragua. They are the Balurde Brown variety, not seen in North America. Long lines of trucks rumble out of Puerto Cabezas on the only road into the city, which goes all the way to Managua. It is referred to, appropriately enough, as the Potato Highway, and it was described by Ernest Hemingway in one of his lesser-known stories, "At Noon Cometh the Spud Truck."

This part of Nicaragua belongs to indigenous people, the Shinnecock Indians, who raised potatoes and ducks since their beginnings. The ducks, however, got wiped out by some sort of bird flu, which was probably brought to Nicaragua by Balboa in 1513. He was looking for another ocean, and the Indians pointed south and said, "It's that way." So he and his men went that way and "discovered" the Pacific Ocean. And along the way they had sex with a lot of Indian women, who were "easy," so that's how Nicaragua got a large population of Spanish-Indian hybrids. The women are pretty hot. Bianca Jagger is a good example. She got her start at fame as the country's Potato Queen of 1964, and she is still the country's favorite celebrity.

Tourism is just starting to take off in Puerto Cabezas. Local people still regard North Americans as "los estupidos norteamericanos," because of the thousands of liberal white kids who went to Nicaragua back in the 80's to pick crops and show solidarity with the peasants. It is pretty stupid when you think about it: paying your own way to Nicaragua to pick crops for nothing. And these are the same fools who protest against "exploitation" of cheap labor in the Third World by big American companies. Well, as I always say, if you identify with the poor, you're destined to be poor. The people I know who went to Nicaragua to pick crops still live like poor bohemians, and when I offer to give them good stock tips or to teach them how to sell options, they laugh and say, "I don't have any money."

But a second wave of visitors is finding Puerto Cabezas as a tourist destination, and that's good as long as they avoid the rest of Nicaragua. Managua, for instance, is a total f—ing ripoff. You must never spend a single minute in Managua. So forget about getting to Puerto Cabezas via the Potato Highway, which is too dangerous for tourists. And forget about flying from Managua to Puerto Cabezas. The airlines suck, they're a ripoff, and the airport at Puerto Cabezas is, to be euphemistic, rather basic, and landing there is risky except in daylight and in perfect weather.

So your best access to Puerto Cabezas is the Royal Caribbean cruise ship *Joker of the Seas.* *Joker* is the "cheap" ship in the fleet, and it offers a bargain-priced cruise to some of the less-visited destinations, such as Devil's Island. *Joker* will give you three days in Puerto Cabezas, but you can always get off and stay longer and pick up *Joker* on the way back.

You'll want to stay at the Carlton Hotel Puerto Cabezas, which is the only hotel up to civilized-white-people standards. General Manager Massimiliano Perversi runs an efficient inn with about 50 rooms, averaging a very reasonable $150 a night, not including the $10 "health tax" the government

charges you for bringing your civilized-white-people diseases into the country. Some of the rooms in the Carlton are fitted out in bizarre fashion. For instance, you have "crypt" rooms, where you sleep in a big coffin, and there are all these skeletons and monster figures and creepy sound effects. "It was Daniel Ortega's idea," explains Perversi, referring to the President of Nicaragua. "He comes up here occasionally with a lady, and they like things kinky." Other theme rooms are "The Mummy's Tomb," "Spider Island," and "The Tingler." There is also a special party room, Room 13, that is reserved for Ortega, but what's inside is a closely guarded secret.

Fishing is the other important aspect of life in Puerto Cabezas, besides potatoes. The city's canneries process tons of hagfish every day. When the cannery whistle blows, the whole street rumbles and groans and screams and rattles while the silver rivers of fish pour in out of the boats. Capt. Neptaly Arias, captain of the fishing boat *Zorra,* is the port's most colorful character. His eye for a hagfish is rivaled only by his eye for a woman. "Here the hagfish is king," he says. "There are many varieties of hagfish, but the Atlantic hagfish is the most delicious. And they are prized by the ladies, who put them in their vaginas while they are still alive."

Arias says that there have been years when the hagfish simply went away for no reason. Then the Indians had to resort to their sacred magic to bring them back. One ritual is the burning of *zozobra,* a 40-foot-high effigy made of wood and chicken wire, meant to represent sin. All the people must write down their sins on paper and place them in *zozobra,* or they must place any object connected with their sins in *zozobra.* When the effigy is full of all the people's sins, it is burned to expiate their guilt. Another ritual is the "stickdance," which is practiced nowhere else in the world. The most beautiful Indian women must dance naked around a tall stake. Then they are tied to the stake and whipped by the old women to make them scream. The screams are heard by the hagfish, who become excited and return. It's all part of a religious belief system, so you can't criticize it.

Hagfish is served everywhere in Puerto Cabezas, but unless you are willing to risk diarrhea, your best place to eat is at the Carlton's restaurant. Head Chef Rosalina Dolmo Martinez gave me her recipe for Hagfish Puerto Cabezas:

Rinse six Atlantic hagfish to remove superficial slime. Place in pot of boiling milk for five minutes, then transfer to casserole dish. Sprinkle with cayenne pepper, salt, and turmeric. Cover with tomato sauce. Bake at 350 degrees F for 25 minutes. Prepare bed of mashed potatoes using Balurde Brown potatoes, with two tablespoons of lard blended in. Sprinkle grated Parmesan cheese over potatoes. Pour finished hagfish and sauce over potatoes. Gordon Ramsay has called this recipe the most outstanding fish dish he has ever eaten.

The bars in Puerto Cabezas are on the edgy side, serving mainly fishermen and sailors of the Nicaraguan Navy. It's best to have a local person as your escort, otherwise the patrons and staff may play rude jokes on you because we are still "estupidos norteamericanos" in their eyes and therefore fair game. Capt. Arias took me to the Hagfish Saloon, which is owned by his friend Raul Barahona. Patrons like to engage in a gruesome variation of arm wrestling involving hot coals, and on Saturday nights the place is turned into a makeshift boxing arena, where drunken toughs can vent their

aggression and betting is encouraged. There is also a dwarf dishwasher who is feeble-minded, and the patrons take turns tossing him into a net. Raul insists the lad enjoys it.

Sailors are also drawn to the city's two whorehouses. You need an escort there, too, if you're an "estupido norteamericano." Both are owned by a relative of Daniel Ortega. Capt. Arias says all the girls are clean. Many of them are Russian.

Shopping is concentrated in the Pelotudo Market, which used to consist mainly of farmers selling potatoes off their carts. But the market has gone upscale for the growing tourist trade. Tim Horton's has a donut shop. Harry Winston has a jewelry shop. Takashimaya, a big Japanese department store chain, has moved in, as well as American Apparel and Toys R Us. And guess what! NO CRAPPY CHINESE MERCHANDISE ANYWHERE! Amazing! There is one store that is very peculiar, however, according to Capt. Arias — The Anti-Aging Shop. "They sell cosmetics to keep the skin looking young. But there are almost never any customers in the store. They don't run sales or promotions. They don't advertise. They don't have a website. And they're not even listed in the Yellow Pages. Yet they remain there year after year, occupying expensive retail space. What does all that add up to?" he asks, giving me a sly look. I confess I don't know. "Ach! *Estupido norteamericano!* It's money-laundering! Don't you see?" Wow! You could have knocked me over with a feather!

Puerto Cabezas has two beaches, Malecon and Panocha. They're fine to sit on, but that's about it. There's no surfing. Bathing is at your own risk, on account of the occasional shark. Don't go there alone, and don't carry any money or valuables. The death rate for Malecon is about one per 10,000 visitors, and Panocha is closer to two per 10,000. But the latter is a topless beach with lots of hot women with big tits, so it's worth the additional risk.

A mile north of town is the Haunted Lighthouse of Death, so named because a visitor died of food poisoning after eating a hamburger from the snack bar, and his spirit haunts the lighthouse seeking revenge. Before that it was just the Puerto Cabezas Lighthouse, but these people know how to turn tragedy into opportunity. The lighthouse actually serves little purpose from a nautical point of view, since there are no reefs or dangerous currents. But it's a make-work job created by the government, and if the lighthouse-keeper isn't too drunk to attend to his duties, the light is turned on at night to serve as an aid to drunken pilots looking for the airport.

South of Puerto Cabezas is an artificial lake that you won't find on any map. It's referred to as Ink Lake. This is where the Sandinista government dumps the bodies of writers and journalists who have gotten up the government's nose. The name was the inspiration for the Canadian story anthology *From Ink Lake* (Vintage Canada, 1995), which, unfortunately, was a poor seller because I wasn't included in it.

Puerto Cabezas is the site of the world's only shelter for "hand-walkers." These are mentally deficient people who walk on all fours like animals. Apparently, there are a lot of them in Nicaragua, but no one knows why. The Indians regard them as cursed. The shelter is operated by the Church of Santo Cabron, which raises money by selling mail order ministerial credentials through classified ads

in tabloids (suggested donation $50). Father Jesus Humberto Canales, a self-ordained minister not connected to any particular denomination, was once photographed with Hillary Clinton and milks it for all it's worth. He also has interests in racetracks and casinos in South and Central America. The hand-walkers appeared in a documentary on *NOVA.* One of them has been offered a scholarship to study sociology at Northeastern University in Boston.

A new attraction scheduled to open late in 2010 is "Triassic Park," which will feature large Komodo lizards that roam freely. Jon Gosselin is the major investor behind it. He says it'll be a great outing for parents with too many children. He also intends to use it for a reality show about a bachelor who has lots of girlfriends, and they all live in this big park full of lizards. (But TLC isn't going to get it!)

Puerto Cabezas doesn't have a Mayor as such. Instead, the *de facto* power broker of the city is potato tycoon Ernesto Echavarria, who is very tight with Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas. I was fortunate enough to meet him over dinner at the Carlton, along with Massimiliano Perversi. By an astounding coincidence, it turned out that Echavarria owned one of my books, *I Chewed Mrs. Ewing's Raw Guts,* which was given to him as a gift by an "estupido norteamericano" from Toronto, who went to Nicaragua to pick potatoes. This book is an out-of-print collector's item, and you might possibly find it (along with my other books) at www.abebooks.com, although I have no control over prices on the collector's market.

I asked Echavarria if Puerto Cabezas had a "sister city," and he said yes — Burlington, Vermont. I was surprised, so I investigated further and found that Burlington had *seven* sister cities, which Echavarria didn't realize. We agreed that Puerto Cabezas deserved an exclusive sister relationship, and I said I would find another sister city for it. And I did — Blenheim, New Zealand. The deal was sealed with Mayor Alistair Sowman of Marlborough District Council, who will be visiting Puerto Cabezas as a special guest early in 2010. Capt. Arias promises to take him to *both* whorehouses and get him drunk at the Hagfish Saloon. Whether Sowman gets to party in Room 13 at the Carlton, however, depends entirely on President Ortega's schedule.

Recommended vaccinations: Colorado tick fever, Erdheim Chester Disease, Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia.

18. Choibalsan, Mongolia

How could we do a world tour of exotic cities and neglect Mongolia? Impossible! My many Mongoloid readers would never forgive me. Mongolia is far too fascinating. And I have uranium investments there.

But we're not going to Ulan Bator. It's too crowded with tourists this time of year. Instead, we're going to Choibalsan, the capital of Dornod province, in the eastern end of the country. It's less well-known but still has a tourist trade. And the weather is nice right now — just a tad on the cool side, with one sunny day after another.

So I'm on this cute, little Saab 340 of Eznis Airways, coming from Ulan Bator. Across the aisle is a lady from New Zealand — Cherie Howie, a reporter for the Marlborough *Express*. She looks unhappy. What's the problem? Well, it seems that some nasty person nominated her for New Zealand Media Twit of the Year. Her co-workers tried to reassure her that it was only a nomination; she hadn't actually won yet. But her editor was not amused. He said she had to redeem herself. So he put a big world map on the wall, closed his eyes, and threw a dart at it. And wherever the dart hit, she had to go there and get a story. The dart hit Choibalsan, Mongolia.

"It's not so bad," I told her. "The dart could have hit the middle of the ocean. At least it hit a place with people. And I'm told that Choibalsan is very interesting. You're sure to find a good story."

When you get to the airport, there's a minibus waiting to take you to the Swissotel Choibalsan (comfy, unpretentious, moderately-priced), whose General Manager is Bart Westerhout. "This is the best posting I've ever had," says Bart. "I could have gone to Paris or Geneva, but I jumped at Choibalsan. The climate is invigorating, the people are upbeat, and the food is superb." Bart has a vast knowledge of Mongolia and the Choibalsan region, and I learned some surprising things. "Genghis Khan hated this place. It's the only place in Mongolia he couldn't stand to be in. He felt there was something evil about it. And he may have been right. There is a legend that an evil spirit, which is referred to as 'The Evil One,' comes to Choibalsan every thirty-three years. Two-thousand-and-ten will be the thirty-third year. That ought to pack in the tourists!" What happened in 1977? "That was before my time. But local people say there was an outbreak of mass hysteria in the Buddhist monastery. The monks claimed The Evil One had appeared. They resorted to two days of non-stop chanting to drive it away. Several people and some animals disappeared. The government investigated and dismissed the whole thing as superstition and capitalist propaganda. Today, the older people still believe in The Evil One, but the young people don't." And does this Evil One have a name? "It has a name," says Bart, "but you must never speak it aloud, or you will die. Before you leave, I'll write it down on paper for you." Wow! Now there's a story for Cherie Howie!

Another surprising thing I learned was that, despite the early Mongols' reputation as horsemen, modern Mongolians are afraid of horses! "They won't even get on a pony," says Bart. But outside of town there's a zebra ranch! The government brought them to Mongolia as an experiment to see if they

could adapt to the climate and also as a possible food animal. The zebras adapted, but no one wanted to eat them. So they serve only as a tourist attraction. You can ride them if they're properly tranquilized. Another good story for Cherie Howie!

Choibalsan has an east side and a west side. The west side became seriously depopulated and fell into ruin when the Russians left, and the east side is where the action is. *But…*something really big is brewing on the depressed west side: a hockey arena is being built! And this story hasn't hit the media in North America yet, but Bart is in the know, and he gave me the straight dope: Jim Balsillie, who is trying to buy the Phoenix Coyotes and move them to Hamilton, Ontario, is secretly creating a Mongolian Hockey League! For what it would cost him to buy the Coyotes, he could build a half dozen rinks, sign a lot of young players from the minor leagues, and create a complete league. "The Mongolians will love it," says Bart. "It's a novelty. It's a sport. He's made some good connections in the government. It's going to happen." There's *another* good story for Cherie Howie!

Or so I thought. I met the reporter for lunch at the Verena Restaurant and told her about The Evil One, the zebras, and the hockey league. "No, no, no," she said. "The readers of the *Express* don't believe in superstition, they have no interest in zebras, and we don't play hockey in New Zealand." Okay, well, I tried to be helpful.

The Verena specializes in the local delicacy — sheep brains. Head Chef Elshad Abasov is a master of it. He gave me his recipe for Sheep Brain a la Choibalsan:

Remove outside skin and soak brain in cold water until blood has run out. Then put brain in pot with two quarts of water, four ounces of red wine vinegar, two onions (quartered), one carrot, one half head of red cabbage, two stalks of rhubarb, six okra, one tablespoon salt, one half teaspoon black pepper, one half teaspoon sage, one teaspoon chopped ginger, one half teaspoon chili powder, one tablespoon juniper berries, one sprig of dill, one sprig of rosemary, and two bay leaves. Bring to a boil and simmer for one-half hour. Remove brain, cut in half, and serve on bed of orzo and cottage cheese. Pour rest of the pot over the brain. Heston Blumenthal has added this dish to the new menu at the Little Chef restaurant chain (U.K.) with great success. (And you thought Brits had no taste, didn't you?) Cherie Howie went to the ladies' room to throw up, but I suspect it was a trick to stick me with the bill.

Not far from the Verena is the Choibalsan Music Hall. The Mongolian heavy metal rock band Hurd was in town, so I went. I have no idea what their songs are about, but they were loud, and they threw pieces of raw meat at the audience. Hurd will becoming to Canada in April of 2010 for a tour of the Atlantic provinces, and Rita MacNeil will be opening for them.

The Dornod Midget Ballet Company, based in Choibalsan, puts on a distinctly Mongolian version of *Swan Lake.* You can see them at the Choibalsan Little Theatre, located on the bank of the Kherlen River, next to the mental hospital.

There's good shopping in Choibalsan, especially if you're into guns, leather, and liquor. The biggest surprise, however, is fashion. The tremendously popular *avant garde* designer Helmut Lang has opened a big boutique and is setting the fashion world abuzz with what he calls the "Mongolian

Psycho" look. His proteges, Michael and Nicole Colovos, have been managing the label since 2005, but Lang has returned to manage the Choibalsan outlet personally because of his Mongolian roots.

Lots of little shops sell quaint novelties, including busts of Elvis and Genghis Khan, but most of these stores are run by Chinese, oddly enough.

You can rent a Jeep and go visit the Organ Pipe Cactus Wilderness, a unique mini-ecosystem an hour's drive north of town (bad dirt road, so drive slowly). Here you will find the Mongolian leatherneck turtle in abundance. Visitors can rent guns and shoot them. The shells of the leatherneck turtle are fashioned by local artisans to make party hats and protective athletic gear. (Where's Cherie Howie? This is a story!)

At Bart Westerhout's suggestion, I went five miles west of town to view the Moukalaba-Doudou Industrial Park, where all plants and animals have been exterminated to allow for coal mining, oil and gas drilling, and the manufacturing of toxic chemicals. The multi-colored plumes of smoke are breathtaking at sunset, and any birds flying through them fall dead to the ground.

Beside the park runs the Waka Canal, which carries untreated sewage from Choibalsan. New grooms are invited to test their fortitude by diving into the canal to retrieve money scattered by their friends as part of a traditional Mongolian marriage custom. It's a scene straight out of *The Magic Christian.*

Elsewhere, the Mongolian Institute of Aluminum Siding offers the visitor a stunning display of artistic and industrial metalworks. Tuesdays are "pay what you like."

The steppes of Mongolia are mostly devoid of trees, but a rare exception is the forest of okoume trees south of Choibalsan. The wood is used to make furniture for movie stars in Beverly Hills, and the fruit is used to make weight-loss products advertised in *The National Enquirer.*

Earthquakes happen occasionally in this part of Mongolia. When the earth splits open, giant prehistoric bugs emerge to devour people and livestock. But such events do not cloud the spirits of the normally optimistic Mongolians, who are used to adversity. Indeed, Choibalsan's official motto is *"Gii chii pizda,"* which means "The future has to be better."

Back at the Swissotel, I asked Bart Westerhout if Choibalsan had a sister city, and he said no. We agreed it should have one. So he invited the city's Mayor, Shukhratjon Aikoraev ("Call me Shooky") to come over for a drink. Shooky doesn't have any real governing authority. He's sort of a figurehead, who spends most of his time in a smoke-filled gambling den, but this was the sort of thing he could do within his limited power. Sister city? Great idea! And I knew just the place — Bismarck, North Dakota. Same climate, same geography, same spirit. Mayor John Warford ("The fighting orthodontist of North Dakota") was thrilled with the idea. Bismarck didn't have a real sister city (we won't count Mandan), and with the mayoral election coming up in 2010, what a gift it would be to the community! John Warford deserves to be reelected, and I urge all Bismarckers to vote for him.

Cherie Howie happened to meet us in the bar, and I had a ton of story ideas for her: the rock band Hurd, the midget ballet, the Helmut Lang boutique, Organ Pipe Cactus Wilderness, the industrial park,

grooms diving into sewage for money, the Institute of Aluminum Siding, the okoume tree forest, the earthquakes, giant bugs, and, best of all, Choibalsan's new sister city! But it was *no, no, no, no, no.* Not for the readers of the Marlborough *Express.* "Then what the heck are you going to write about?" I asked.

"Cats," she said.

"Cats?"

"Yes. House cats. How people here love their cats. Our readers love cat stories."

Now that's journalism!

Before I left Choibalsan, Bart Westerhout slipped a folded piece of paper into my hand. "You wanted to know the name of The Evil One — the name that must never be spoken aloud. *Promise me…*you won't even look at it until you're on the plane back to UB." So I promised.

Climbing into the cool autumn air, with the exotic city of Choibalsan fading from view, and Cherie Howie with her laptop out, putting the finishing touches on her cat article, I nervously unfolded the paper that Bart Westerhout had given to me and read the name of The Evil One. *And please…don't ever say this name aloud:*

GORGULAX.

Recommended vaccinations: Dyggve Melchior Clausen Syndrome, sacrococcygeal teratoma, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease.

19. Maiduguri, Nigeria

Close your eyes and sit back. Allow yourself to be borne aloft by fairies. (The flight crew is gay.) You're floating now, as if in a dream, traveling across time and space. Soon you will land in the Shangri-la of Africa. The fairies are setting you down gently. Now you can open your eyes. A big sign reads: "Welcome to Maiduguri, Nigeria."

This is a land where the past meets the present. Both get drunk and stagger out, looking for the future. The imperfect is found dead by the side of the road, and the subjunctive gets accused. A dangling participle and sentence fragment are held as evidence. A conjunction is held to parse the sentence, and the subjunctive is represented by the future perfect and the conditional, but the active voice is exclamatory and demands an interjection. Eventually, an adverbial clause is arrived at, the solecism is ruled ungrammatical, and the subject is thrown into a parenthesis until the dative, ablative, and gerundive cases shall be resurrected from their graves and illiterates playing video games shall perish in hell.

Look for the bright yellow school bus marked "Ritz-Carlton Maiduguri." It will whisk you away at a good twenty miles an hour along the airport road, allowing you to take in the color and fragrance of the endless fields of rafflesia on either side. You'll recognize the hotel by its lime-green exterior and *faux* Corinthian columns. We're expected. General Manager Francois Cnockaert is waiting to greet us personally. The man is ageless. He has a portrait in his attic that ages for him while he remains young. I told you this was Shangri-la, didn't I?

Nigeria has been made wealthy by its vast oil resources, so you will not find the sort of nasty, horrible things that exist in the "not nice" countries of the Third World. And it's not just your ordinary crude oil; it's Nigerian Sweet Crude. Ask any refiner. A tanker full of Nigerian Sweet Crude is worth killing my sister for. (Come to think of it, a gallon or two would suffice.) And Maiduguri has its own refinery, so that gasoline can be made fresh on the spot. It is, in fact, the only refinery of *halal* gasoline in the world. An imam stands beside the pipeline chanting "Allah…Allah…Allah…" all day long as the gasoline flows through.

Francois was frantically busy with a crowd of visitors attending the Shadfly Festival (more on that in a moment) and promised to meet up with me later. In the meantime, he introduced me to my host who would show me around — Prof. Hani ("Call me Hank") Rabe, Head of the Canadian Studies Dept. at the Maiduguri branch of the University of Nigeria.

"You are my hero," Hank confessed with a blush. "I have several of your books. I have told my class that you are the greatest Canadian writer of all time." The Canadian Studies Dept. was made possible by an administrative error on the part of the Canadian International Development Agency. They sent a large sum of money to the wrong account to pay for a hockey rink. The university simply kept it, and CIDA never caught their mistake. So Hank got his longed-for Canadian Studies Dept., of

which he is the only faculty member. There is one course, and four students are enrolled, although two rarely show up.

"The Maiduguri region was the home of an ancient civilization called the Snake People," Hank told me, as we rode along in his classic '72 Plymouth Duster, whose Slant-6 engine still purrs smoothly after all these years. "Almost nothing is known about them, except that they must have been very advanced." *Why is that?* I ask. "The fact that they left nothing behind means that they cleaned up after themselves. That proves how advanced they were, you see."

"I get it."

Although the Snake People are considered extinct, there is, in fact, one of them alive today — Shirley Brown, City Councillor of Bristol, England. One of my neighbors, Ghrugnanasampa Thavakugathasalingam of 61 Town Centre Court, Scarborough, has called the Snake People "a bunch of ugly nigger monkeys." But, hey, look who's talking!

The Ngadda River, which flows through Maiduguri, lends a special charm to the city, owing to its pristine nature. And every November the shadflies come out of the river to fill the air by the millions for several weeks. It's one of nature's great spectacles, and it provides the occasion for the world's only Shadfly Festival. Although harmless, the shadflies can be frightening to those experiencing them for the first time. Local people show off their courage by allowing themselves to be covered with them from head to foot. The shadfly is celebrated with good humor and creativity, and the festival adds a boost to the economy. The Shadfly Queen is crowned to cap it off. The current Queen is Basaratu Mojisola Bakare-Giles, a nude volleyball player who has been linked romantically with Tiger Woods. The shadfly phenomenon also occurs in North Bay, Ontario, in June and July. No one knows why these insects come out when they do, but they're only around for a short time, so everyone tries to enjoy them. All shadflies belong to the order *Ephemeroptera.* They are mentioned in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead,* as well as *The Book of Mormon.*

Another insect of importance to Maiduguri is the wasp. The city boasts the world's only wasp apiary, where scientists have used the "royal jelly" of the queen wasp to make an anti-aging skin cream (not yet available in North America). The 1960 movie *The Wasp Woman* offers a dramatic look at the possibilities held out by wasp "royal jelly." (Omarosa recently ordered a huge shipment by courier, so let's keep an eye on her!)

Also of importance to Maiduguri are the famous Nigerian green sheep, also known as Gewad Greens, or just "Gewads." The green color is a genetic trait and not related to what they eat. The sheep are raised on a ranch owned by the benevolent society Boko Haram, which sells wool caps and sweaters to tourists and to stores in many countries. They also sponsor a fashion school famous for its daring lingerie and swimwear.

Get up early for a day trip to Lake Chad, which is shared by Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon. Lake Chad is home to the African carp *(Carpio terribilus),* a huge, aggressive fish known to jump out of the water and attack people — even pursuing them onto land in some cases! It is a favorite among

experienced fishermen, who like to stuff this inedible fish for display. (Eminem landed a 100-pounder after a two-hour battle!)

The only good beach at Lake Chad is known as Koos Beach, which is a topless beach on the Nigerian side. Fergie likes it a lot. Elsewhere, the lake is bordered by marshes and desert shrublands, which are the habitat of several rare species of gerbils, including the horned gerbil, the cyclops gerbil, and the elephant gerbil, whose rough, crinkled skin makes it an ideal pet for Kanapathipillai Suvannavisayagamoorthy of 35 Valleywoods Road, North York, who has two retarded children and a mother who never bathes (see "Dung People of Sri Lanka," *Canadian Wonder Magazine For Children,* July, 2002).

Lake Chad, by the way, was first explored by the Vikings, and fragments of their settlement can be seen on the south side of the lake, just across the Chad border, on the Lake Road, about 100 meters from Nianaiebi's Lemonade Stand, which is owned by Nianaiebi Diorra, boyfriend of Kayla Kleevage. Kayla has become a very popular performer in Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic since she became too old for American club audiences.

There's "old" shopping and "new" shopping in Maiduguri. The old shopping is found in the city's central plaza, which is bordered on all sides by quaint little shops and outdoor stalls, most with no names. There are a few noteworthy ones. There's a store where traditional Muslim women go to buy their unmentionables. There's a shop that sells all sorts of live birds, lizards, and snakes (some poisonous). There's an herbal shop run by Madame Folashade Ahiata Price, whose specialty is poisonous plants. (The CIA has relied on her expertise in bumping people off in such a way that nobody can prove it was murder.) And there is a large shop that sells ammunition in bulk. There are dozens of barrels full of bullets of all calibres and types. You take a scoop and fill a bag, just like a bulk candy shop. Every round is guaranteed to fire or you can return it for a replacement.

I mustn't forget the Walking Stone in the middle of the plaza. This is a plain stone spire about fifteen feet high, with a plot of grass and a little fence around it. You will find people walking slowly around this stone any hour of the day or night, and in any weather — and always counter-clockwise. They could be "walking the stone" for a variety of reasons — to express their piety, atone for sins, search for inner peace, or contemplate a problem; or they could just be lunatics or bums with nothing better to do. One merchant warned me, however, that a tourist — especially a Westerner — must never walk the stone, or people will think he's poking fun at them. One tourist not only walked the stone but walked it *clockwise* and was beaten to within an inch of his life for such insolence!

The "new" shopping is located in the Maiduguri Mall, on the outskirts of town. It's modern, air-conditioned, and full of happy, prosperous Nigerian consumers. The flagship store is Mighty Maidi, a department store. All the sales clerks are young Muslim women, but not like any you've ever seen. They wear a kerchief over their hair, which is normal for Muslim women, but from the neck down they're dressed like sluts — big tits pushing out of their bras, micro-skirts, black fishnet stockings, and high heels. (You'll find this throughout the mall, in fact.) You'll be in there browsing for a long time, and you won't leave without buying something. These babes know how to be persuasive.

The mannequins in the clothing stores are dressed the same way, but since they're not real, they don't have to wear a kerchief. They're molded with absurdly huge tits and asses. There's even a store that just sells life-size foam rubber sex dolls, with tits as big as you want and any combination of features, and with fuckable, washable holes.

I bought a ton of pipe tobacco at Big M Smoke Shop, and it was so stupidly cheap I couldn't believe it. Almost everyone in Maiduguri smokes, by the way, and there are no laws whatever regarding smoking. And tobacco taxes are minimal. (If that doesn't qualify as Shangri-la, I don't know what does!)

The Maiduguri Mall is 50%-owned by Mack-Cali Realty. The other 50% is owned by a Nigerian syndicate known as Manuke Khara.

Hank Rabe and I had dinner at the Old Sawmill, the most elegant restaurant in town. It used to be a slaughterhouse, and some of the old fixtures were left in during the conversion to give it a funky atmosphere. Head Chef Abdoulkadir Ali Musse serves up a mighty fine monkey stew. Here's the recipe:

Hack off arms, legs, and head of monkey, and rip out internal organs. Trim remaining meat away from bones and chop into one-inch pieces. Season with black pepper and brown in a skillet with palm oil and a splash of rum. Transfer to stew pot, add three cups of fish stock, a chopped turnip, a cup of chopped celery, a dozen radishes, two chopped sweet potatoes, a half cup of corn starch, a tablespoon of basil, a tablespoon of marjoram, a tablespoon of sea salt, two or three chopped cloves of garlic, a teaspoon of dry mustard, an ounce of Angostura bitters, and a half cup of mayonnaise. Simmer over a low-to-moderate heat for 1 1/2 hours. Jessica Simpson and her date, soccer player Giovanni Tegano, who plays for Juventus, appeared to love it. They sat at the table next to us.

Later we went to Neek Hallak, the most popular nightclub. There we caught a wonderful performance by musician Mbuke Jumgwuthka, the world's foremost player of the *kuntigi,* a small, single-stringed lute made out of a sardine can covered with goatskin. I recognized Madonna and her boyfriend, Jesus Luz, in the audience. (She was disguised with a wig, but I still picked her out.) They were clearly enthralled.

Hank and I went back to the Ritz-Carlton for a nightcap with Manager Francois Cnockaert, who gave me the straight dope on Nigerian e-mails. The Maiduguri branch of the Bank of Nigeria is the one that has all those secret bank accounts that people who e-mail you want you to help them move out of the country. However, the money is all in the local currency, the *naira*, not U.S. dollars, and if you offer to help the frantic person who is praying to God for your benevolent assistance, you will be asked to pay for the rental of the cargo plane needed to transport all those banknotes to Switzerland.

Francois had a copy of one of my books, *Blood-Sucking Monkeys From North Tonawanda,* and asked me to autograph it, which I was happy to do. (You can try searching for this collector's item, as well as my other books, at www.abebooks.com, but I have no control over prices on the collector's market.)

Francois had heard that I was an expert at arranging “sister city” relationships and asked if I could find a sister city for Maiduguri. He was close to the Mayor, who couldn’t speak English, and was acting on his behalf. I told him I would do it before I left. And I did.

Be pleased to inform Her Majesty that Slough (rhymes with “cow”), Berkshire, England, is now the sister city of Maiduguri, Nigeria. The Chief Executive of Slough Council, Ruth Bagley, is “thrilled beyond belief” and calls the new relationship the best thing to happen to Slough during her tenure. She plans to visit Maiduguri sometime in 2010 and is very keen to get her hands on some of that wasp jelly anti-aging cream.

Recommended vaccinations: Chikungunya virus, Rosai-Dorfman Disease, epidermolytic hyperkeratosis.

20. Vinh, Vietnam

Our world tour of exotic cities is almost at an end. I'm sure you'll agree it's been great fun and extremely enlightening. Don't complain that you're maxed out on all your credit cards after all this globetrotting. You've still got that Christmas bonus to spend, don't you? And we've got one more place left to visit: Vinh, Vietnam.

Vinh is an enchantress among cities, but without the Circean evil that turns men into swine (as in Ottawa, for example). Vinh is eager for tourism after being overlooked for so many years. They want to catch up. And seven out of ten travelers agree: a vacation in Vinh is more delightful than a root canal.

Vinh is located on Vietnam's "Gold Coast," so named because of the anthills containing gold. In fact, Vinh is the Anthill Capital of the World. It is home to the Asian tiger ant *(Solenopsis mendacis),* the same variety that attacked Joan Collins in *Empire of the Ants.* Early Spanish explorers noticed the grains of gold in the anthills and took them as a sign that they were close to the Golden Grail, also known as El Dorado. But they got lost in the Forest of Blinh and were eaten by the monster Smatma. After this disaster, King Charles II forbade all further exploration in the area, so the French were able to move in uncontested.

There are no good travel deals to Vinh, unfortunately, because there isn't a whole lot of tourism yet. (The round trip from Toronto cost me about $3,700, and Air Canada's nuts were stale.) But once you get there, you can load up on counterfeit designer goods that you can resell back home.

The best hotel in town is the Ramada Vinh, which is surprisingly affordable for all its luxury, with an average room rate of about $150 per night. In the lobby, gilded domes frescoed with sweeping clouds and hanging gardens frame chandeliers of 24-karat gold and crystal. The marble floors are polished to mirror perfection. A broad arch opens to a garden with a pool. Goldfish cruise lazily in a rock-rimmed pond. In the suites, painted cherubs smile down on a massive raised bed, and a 60-channel projection TV screen drops from the ceiling. The bathrooms of Italian marble and French onyx are stocked with Egyptian-cotton towels, robes, and slippers. Press a button, and the red satin drapes part, giving a view of the rolling hills and a new housing development. A masseuse is available 24 hours a day, and she will massage you with her well-oiled naked body.

General Manager Freddie Ho greeted me personally. He said he was my biggest fan in all of Vietnam, although my books are officially banned. I said I was surprised to find such opulence in a Communist country. "This is the new Vietnam," he explained. "It's Communist in theory, but it's becoming more capitalist in practice. Just get the tourists in and get them to spend their money. And Ramada wants a piece of the action."

Freddie was too busy to show me around town, so he put me in the able hands of his good friend Dan Van Nguyen. Dan was evasive about his occupation, saying only that he was well-connected and did things for people. "Sort of a fixer," he said. "I help people with their problems and needs." He offered to fix me up with hookers, but I declined.

The first thing every visitor wants to see is the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh, which is in the village of Kim Lien, about 14 kms northwest of Vinh. There you will find multicolored dancing fountains surrounding Ho's statue. He is holding two children by the hand, and a cocker spaniel sits beside his feet. The gift shop sells every sort of Ho souvenir, and all the employees are amputees, so if you're a liberal, you just load up with all you can carry.

On the outskirts of the Forest of Blinh, where nobody goes for obvious reasons, you will find the villages of the Dogon people. The Dogon are ethnically unrelated to the Vietnamese, and nobody knows their true origins. They are a pacifist people who have an ingenious method of preventing fighting. All their dwellings have such low roofs that you can't stand up straight. The idea is that if somebody gets mad at somebody else and tries to stand up, he can't, so there's no way they can fight without looking stupid. Predictably, all the Dogon have a stooped posture. They worship the ant, and they leave scraps of food at a giant anthill for "protection." They also practice a dance on hot coals as a puberty rite. Boys and girls must dance on the hot coals to become adults. It's part of a religious belief system, so you can't criticize it.

Quyet Mountain is on the outskirts of Vinh. It's the home base of the Vinh Paragliding Club. Paragliders launch themselves from the summit and glide over the Lam River, which skirts the city. The Lam has a lot of crocodiles, and the paragliders compete to see who can traverse the river the most times without falling in. You should check out some of this action on YouTube.

There is a muscular exuberance in the Lam's rapids, danger in its floods. But on most days the river welcomes the adventurer with lyric grace — except in typhoons, when everything up to the size of a water buffalo is swept away and killed.

Go east to the coast about 10 kms and enjoy the pristine white beach at Cua Lo. Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart were seen there recently, and according to observers, they were getting pretty romantic. It's easy to understand why. Cua Lo is a romantic dream, with its blue water, palm trees, and strolling troubadours singing Vietnamese love songs and playing the mandolin, while flocks of pink flamingoes circle overhead in search of fiddler crabs, their favorite food.

Speaking of food, try the seafood at Em Ghet Anh, a popular seaside restaurant. Their specialty is boiled moray eel served on a bed of seaweed.

Downtown Vinh is an artful example of East German social realist architecture, with its gray, cube-shaped public buildings flanking its wide streets. Luxury Soviet-made limos blend in with smoky little Trabants and a few odd rickshaws. Smartly dressed traffic cops keep everything moving efficiently as they blow their whistles and bark repeatedly "Mu cac tao!…Mu cac tao!…"

At the top of Quang Trung Street you will find Vinh's most famous landmark, "Uncle Vinnie" — a 60-foot-high neon ant. He's the city's unofficial mascot. (What else would you expect in the Anthill Capital of the World?) The Vinh High School athletic teams are called the Tiger Ants and they wear a logo like Uncle Vinnie. The cheerleaders do this cute little "Ant Dance," and if you're sitting in the right place, you can see the cracks of their asses.

While on that subject, there is a strip club on Le Mao Street called Thang Nguc Lon, which is always busy, although it is pretty tame by Western standards. They feature a lot of B-list American strippers who have gotten too old or too fat to work in good clubs in the U.S. SaRenna Lee headlined there for a month, and the audience loved her. They thought she had the biggest tits in the world. But what do the Vietnamese know about big tits? Their women are all flat-chested.

That could change, however. Two enterprising brothers, Sy Ba Tran and Van Quyen Tran, have gone into business as breast implant specialists. The former auto mechanics don't have medical degrees, and even in Vietnam they wouldn't normally be allowed to do any sort of medical work, but Dan Van Nguyen said this was something he was able to "fix." The brothers only accept out-of-town patients, by the way, so nobody in Vinh ever gets to see the results of their handiwork.

The Buddhist monastery is a minor attraction. The monks are renowned for their extremely long toenails, which are supposed to demonstrate inner peace. You can make a donation and light a candle and sit with them while they chant, but these guys never bathe, and all that incense isn't enough to conceal the fact, so pretty soon you want to get up and leave. However, the Jonas Brothers spent a whole day in there and said it was the most spiritually uplifting experience of their lives.

Vinh is the home of the Vietnam Museum of Human Rights, but blacks and Jews are not allowed in. The museum has a big display devoted to Jane Fonda. What Jane Fonda has to do with human rights is beyond me, but the Vietnamese love her and worked her in somehow.

The best attraction if you're looking for something really edgy is the Vinh Arena, which stages matches of an extremely violent form of martial arts cage fighting. The contestants wear spikes and fight with sticks. Dan Van Nguyen told me there's always blood, and they average three or four deaths a year. He also said that World Wrestling Entertainment had been to Vinh to check it out and were interested in doing some kind of business deal, and he was trying to help them with that.

For shopping, you have a lot of street vendors and little shops selling counterfeit goods, which I referred to earlier. Dan said the authorities don't mind because the designers and brands are exploiters of Third World labor, so it's okay to rip them off. The People's Committee that administers Vinh calls this "social justice." And they collect big licensing fees from the vendors, so it's a lot of revenue.

If you want more sophisticated shopping, you want to go to the Roman Mall, which is designed to look like ancient Rome. There is a daily royal procession led by a centurion. Moving sidewalks from the street whisk shoppers into the mall. But to get out, they must pass through a door that will not open unless they are laden with a certain minimum weight of merchandise. (So put a brick in your counterfeit Gucci bag before you go in! Oh, and another thing: don't use your credit cards, or you will get a rude surprise in a month or so. Use the local currency.)

The Ramada Vinh has a very nice French restaurant. Head Chef Thi Hai Dinh serves up an elegant kea parrot Michels. Here's the recipe:

Season one large kea parrot with salt, pepper, garlic, and sage. Place in casserole with three ounces of palm oil, two cups of chopped kale, and two cups of chopped rhubarb. Put in oven at 350 degrees

and baste frequently. After 20 minutes, transfer to stove top, add six ounces of malt vinegar, cover pot, and simmer for 10 minutes. Then add one cup of water, once ounce of anchovy paste, and a cup of finely chopped pickled beets. Bring to a boil and cook for 5 more minutes. Serve with rice. (Heston Blumenthal does this with gold leaf on top, but I think that spoils it.)

Dan and I had a late evening drink with Freddie Ho, and we talked about the "new" Vietnam. Freddie said the Vietnamese people were no longer anti-American. In fact, hundreds of them sent cards of condolence to Jennifer Aniston after the death of her dog, Norman.

Freddie surprised me by producing two of my books, *Junior Brain Tumors In Action* and *Malignant Humors,* which he asked me to inscribe personally. (You can try searching for these books, as well as my others, at www.abebooks.com, but I have no control over prices on the collector's market.)

I asked Freddie and Dan if Vinh had a "sister city," and they said no. I offered to find one if Dan could fix it with the People's Committee. "Easy as one, two, three!" said Dan with a big smile. So I found a suitable city the next day.

I'm happy to report that Vinh's sister city is Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. Mayor John Ruttan liked the idea because Nanaimo didn't have a sister city and deserved one. And although he knew nothing about Vinh, he said, "We're 'Left Coast,' as they say, and I guess the Veet-namese are, too, seeing as how they're Communists, ha, ha! And if there are any more of those boat people who want to come over, tell 'em we have a real nice harbour where they can tie their yachts." The Mayor and his wife will be visiting Vinh sometime in 2010 (and this is a heads-up to Air Canada to make sure their nuts are fresh this time!). Mrs. Ruttan is keen to pick up a few Gucci knock-offs.

Recommended vaccinations: retroperitoneal fibrosis, Camurah-Engelmann Disease, parrot fever.